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Ready for Advent

ADVENT IS my favorite season. I think this goes back to the anticipation of school after endless summers, to the joy of fall reunions with college friends, and to my own children's excitement at the first day of school. I love autumn—the leaves turning to red, yellow and orange, the days becoming shorter, the color of the sky and clouds in the gorgeous, slanted fall light. As a boy, I looked forward to darkness at 5 p.m. and to returning home to the cozy warmth of home lights after I had finished the evening paper route.

I'm particularly ready and eager for Advent this year. Perhaps it's because recent world events have been so relentlessly grim: another fatal exchange of rocket fire between Israelis and Palestinians, a car bomb attack on American troops in Afghanistan, more suicide bombs in Iraq, fragile economies in Europe and here at home, and presidential candidates outdoing one another in ignoring the critical issues of immigration, financial regulation and global warming. I need Advent.

This year, I'm winding down my ministry as I prepare for retirement (I will continue as editor/publisher of the *CENTURY*). I vowed not to get caught up in thinking "this is the last time for All Saints Sunday," etc., but I have found it hard not to. As

Abraham Maslow observed after he'd had a heart attack, we would not love passionately if we thought we'd live forever. "My river never looked so beautiful," he said. For me this year, everything is more beautiful, more true.

I hear the profound yearning in Isaiah's poetry: "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down," and the hope: "'Comfort, O comfort my people,' says your God. 'Speak tenderly . . .'"

This Advent season plays out against the backdrop of a materialist culture at its gaudiest, most materialistic, most vulgar; the season's advertising will appeal to the least attractive human characteristics—greed and pride and our need to affirm ourself by what we buy and consume.

Advent responds by reminding us that a child will be born in the midst of a world and a time very much like our own, that the reconciliation and redemption his birth promises is not separate from the world, and that he will call us to follow him and be his people in this same sad, greedy, vulgar and beautiful world. His birth, which dark Advent anticipates, will be a light in the darkness that darkness will not overcome.

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LETTERS

Gender gap

I agree with Thomas G. Long ("Why do men stay away?" Nov. 1) that the reasons men stay away from church "are undoubtedly complex." But the author's use of a tired stereotype about men undermines his point. Though Long may have been sarcastic in characterizing the desirable male experience as "hiding away in a man cave, stuffing our maws with pizza and beer as we watch Da Bears," neither I nor any of the men in my life fit such a stereotype. For decades, writers concerned about justice have abandoned using stereotypes about women. We owe men the same consideration.

Bruce Larson
Columbus, Ohio

Good article, but Christian women that I know are more concerned with their husbands coming to faith than with their going to church. Church attendance would be great, but some agonize over the fact that their husbands don't appear to have a relationship with Christ. Why are men resistant to faith? Or are they?

Maybe it's how faith is practiced, which brings us full circle to the topic of Long's article. Are some men in relationship with Christ, but see no value in the organized church? Can we be OK with that? Are we trying to enforce the less important thing?

Patricia Pope
christiancentury.org comment

I recently finished David Murrow's book *Why Men Hate Going to Church*. The title caught my attention because, after serving as a pastor for 37 years, I noticed a dearth of men in the pews. Although in some ways Murrow is a bit over the top in his suggestions, I found valid his point that men need to be challenged to become more involved.

And I found convincing his insight that "women get to know each other face to face" while "men get to know each other side by side"—hence women are more program-oriented and men more project-oriented. This has sensitized me to the

trappings of my local congregation and prompted me to ask if they have a more feminine or masculine flavor to them.

Paul Aiello
christiancentury.org comment

Some years ago Lesslie Newbigin wrote about the fact-value split in Western culture. If I remember correctly, he posited that men are more fact-oriented and women are more value-oriented. The church, in its attempt to manage morality, comes across as more value-based than fact-based. Newbigin felt this was a major reason why men, at least in the late 20th century, were not active in faith communities.

I have seen some evidence of this in those congregations that are more law-based or fact-based and where men are active in worship and leadership. I don't support law over gospel, but the contrast might help us understand the issue and lead us to ideas of how we might preach and teach.

Rodger Prois
christiancentury.org comment

Sidetracked by football . . .

Rodney Clapp agonizes over the violence of football and the serious injuries it produces ("Would Jesus love football?" Oct. 18), yet his assertion that "true fans do not watch the game primarily to see spectacular hits or the mangling of bodies" rings hollow. If elegant action were enough, football fans would convert to baseball or ballet.

Football ritualizes a combat myth. It domesticates the warrior energy of players and fans, sidetracking them from both interior struggle and social justice.

The influence of professional and college football on American life is hard to overestimate. The harm extends beyond the severe brain injuries suffered by players to a subtle hardening of our collective heart.

Charles Hoffacker
Washington, D.C.

November 29, 2011

Occupied holy ground

St. Paul's Cathedral in London has found itself caught, almost literally, between God and Mammon. Located in the city's financial district, St. Paul's has become a site for the Occupy London Stock Exchange protest, which is drawing attention to corporate greed and socially irresponsible behavior by banks and investment firms.

St. Paul's leaders weren't sure how to respond to the protesters camping in the courtyard. Though some were sympathetic to the protesters' concerns, they were also heartbroken at finding graffiti on the church wall and human waste in the courtyard and inside the church. The presence of the protesters also caused a sharp drop in visitors to the cathedral, which meant a loss of up to \$24,000 a day.

Church officials closed the cathedral, citing health and safety concerns, then opened it a week later, having apparently resolved those concerns. They vacillated between defending the protesters and urging them to go away. Some pressed for the police to remove the protesters, while others thought that such a step would be a public relations disaster. Amid the turmoil, the canon of the cathedral, the dean and a part-time chaplain resigned. By early November, the protesters had received assurances from the cathedral that they could stay at least until the new year.

Church leaders of all stripes can appreciate the practical challenges that St. Paul's has faced. Yet there is something profoundly right about a moral protest taking place in a cathedral courtyard. Since the Middle Ages, cathedral squares have been centers for commercial activity and political discussion. Following in this tradition, St. Paul's even dubs itself "a center for arts, learning and public debate." What a marvelous opportunity for the cathedral to foster learning and debate on the ethics of capitalism and on the social responsibilities of corporations.

What an opportunity, too, for the church to live out its particular vocation by inviting protesters to share in its prayers, liturgies and hymns and to hear the scriptural texts on justice, the defense of the poor, and love of one's enemies. Why not invite the protesters to come inside the cathedral for evening prayer? Why not offer services in the courtyard?

A cathedral is designed to be a place where humans glimpse an alternate way of seeing the world. The point of the soaring architecture and the glorious art is to reorient human beings and help them see the world according to God's purposes—and then to carry that vision back into everyday life.

In that respect, the work of a cathedral is profoundly linked to what the Occupy protesters are doing. They too are questioning the way things are and trying to envision a society oriented toward different priorities. St. Paul's, and every other church, should be grateful when strangers bring that project to the doorstep.

A cathedral courtyard is an appropriate place to envision a different society.

CENTURY marks

DIFFERENT GODS: Neda Agha Soltan became the symbol of the Green Revolution in Iran in 2009 after she was shot and killed while running away from anti-riot police. The grainy cell phone photo of her lying on the ground, with blood streaming from her nose and mouth, went viral. Her older sister later recalled that Neda had spoken about a university professor who was teaching about a vengeful God. Neda had said, "This is not my God. The God I worship is a compassionate and loving God" (Robin Wright, *Rock the Casbah*, Simon and Schuster).

BEYOND TRIBALISM: The world was stunned by the Rwandan genocide in 1994 in which the majority Hutu population tried to wipe out the Tutsis. Three years after the genocide a militia group attacked a secondary school at Nyange and ordered Tutsis and Hutus to form separate lines. The students refused, saying they were all Rwandans. The rebels

responded by shooting indiscriminately, killing 13 students for their refusal to be divided along tribal lines (Emmanuel M. Katongole in *Witness of the Body*, edited by Michael L. Budde and Karen Scott, Eerdmans).

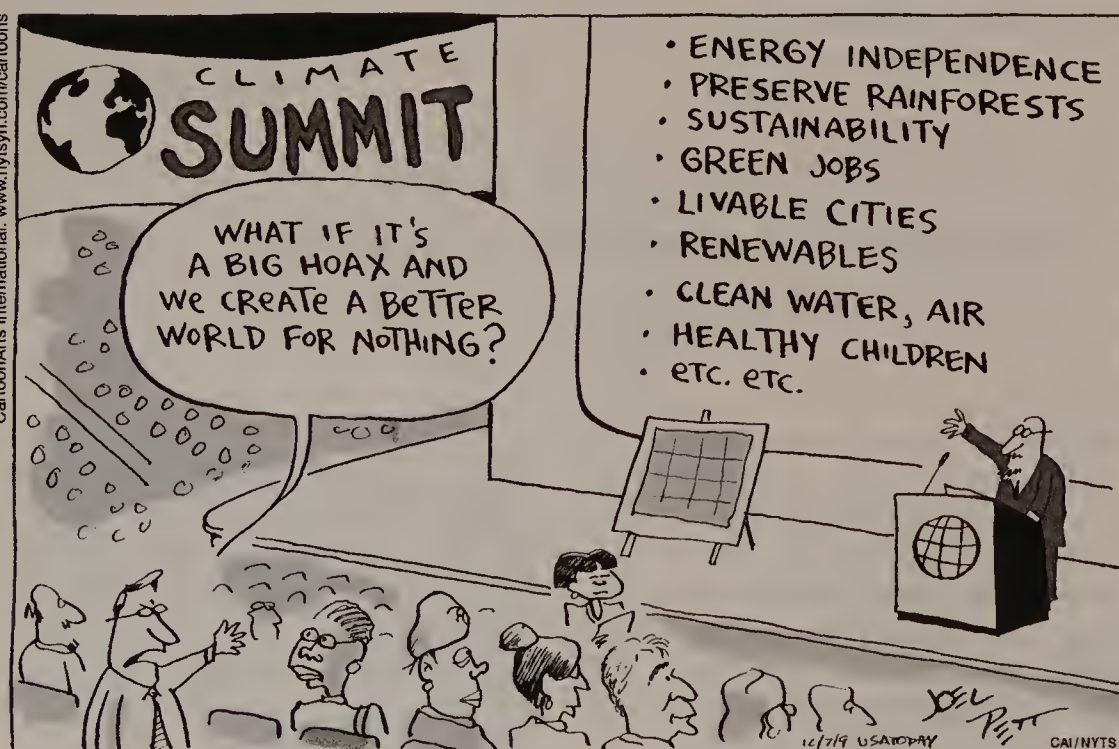
NO EXIT: The popular uprisings that deposed autocratic governments in Tunisia and Egypt were initiated by people whose lives were so desperate that they felt they had nothing to lose. Before the revolts, many in North Africa thought their only hope was to immigrate to Europe. In 2007 a cobbler in Tunisia said to David Cook, a scholar from Rice University: "Do you think that any of us would be here if we could move to France? Everyone would be gone in a week if they would let us in!" (*Hedgehog Review*, Fall).

RESISTANCE: At least six Buddhist monks have died by self-immolation this

year in protests against China's political crackdown in the Tibetan regions of China. In Tibet, monks are not even allowed to celebrate the Dalai Lama's birthday. The Dalai Lama himself has taken a moderate path in opposing Chinese rule, urging China to give Tibetans autonomy but not complete independence. Despite their devotion to the Dalai Lama, Tibetans debate whether his approach has been effective. Some predict that Tibet will explode in protests after he dies (*Time*, November 14).

TAX FREE: A comprehensive study of the 280 most profitable Fortune 500 companies shows that 78 of them paid no income tax in one out of the past three years and 30 of them had a negative income tax rate during that three-year period. In the 1950s a quarter of federal outlays were paid by corporate taxes; in fiscal year 2010 corporate taxes paid only 6 percent of federal government expenses. The report, done by Citizens for Tax Justice and the Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy, notes: "Most Americans can rightfully complain, 'I pay more federal income taxes than General Electric, Boeing, DuPont, Wells Fargo, Verizon, etc., etc., all put together'" (*Salon*, November 3).

POLITICAL STYLE: Not much distinguished two candidates running for the Arizona state senate in Mesa. Both were Mormons and both believed in small government and low taxes. What separated them was style and tone. Russell Pearce is the tough-talking senator who wrote Arizona's anti-immigration law and subsequently lost a recall vote. His opponent, Jerry Lewis, an accountant who runs a chain of charter schools, embodies civility, listening and



compromise. The image of the missionary-minded Church of the Latter Day Saints was tarnished in Latin America by Pearce's anti-immigration rhetoric, says one Mormon. With two Mormon candidates also in the presidential race for the Republican party, the LDS Church is trying to prove that it stays out of politics (*Economist*, November 5).

JEWES AND OWS: An ad running on cable TV shows Occupy Wall Street protesters making anti-Semitic statements and holding up signs offensive to Jews. Kevin Healey points out that the ad is produced by the Emergency Committee for Israel, hardly an unbiased group. It was founded by neoconservative leader William Kristol and evangelical leader Gary Bauer. Other observers point out that the Occupy movement has involved many Jews. Columnists from the Jewish news source JTA said that the Occupy Wall Street protests have a Jewish flavor and are "becoming a fulcrum of Jewish ferment" (*Scoop*, November 3).

LOOKING BACK: Columnist David Brooks stumbled onto a collection of autobiographies written by the Yale class of 1942 for its 50th class reunion. He says that the most common lament in the stories comes from those who worked for the same company all their lives and they now realize that their lives were boring. Another lament came from those who wish they had been willing to take more risks. None of those who did make life-changing choices regretted the decisions, even if the choices ended in failure. The essays of those who sensed a particular calling in life are filled with passion and conviction. Said one, "I have been put on earth to be a painter" (*New York Times*, October 27).

WHEEL OF MISFORTUNE: Buy Here Pay Here companies sell used cars to people with poor credit at higher-than-book values and at interest rates much higher than conventional auto loans. The average profit per sale—38 percent—has attracted the attention of Wall Street. Some financial firms are bundling loans from these dealerships the way they bundled subprime mortgages before the 2008 financial crash.

“In the name of God and Mammon, go!”

— London mayor Boris Johnson, speaking to anticapitalist demonstrators outside St. Paul's Cathedral (*Telegraph*, November 1)

“Contraceptives no more cause sex than umbrellas cause rain.”

— Columnist Nicholas D. Kristof, arguing against efforts to reduce congressional funding for family planning (*New York Times*, November 2)

“All my life I was taught how to die as a Christian, but no one ever taught me how I ought to live in my latter years. Old age has it challenges and is not for wimps.”

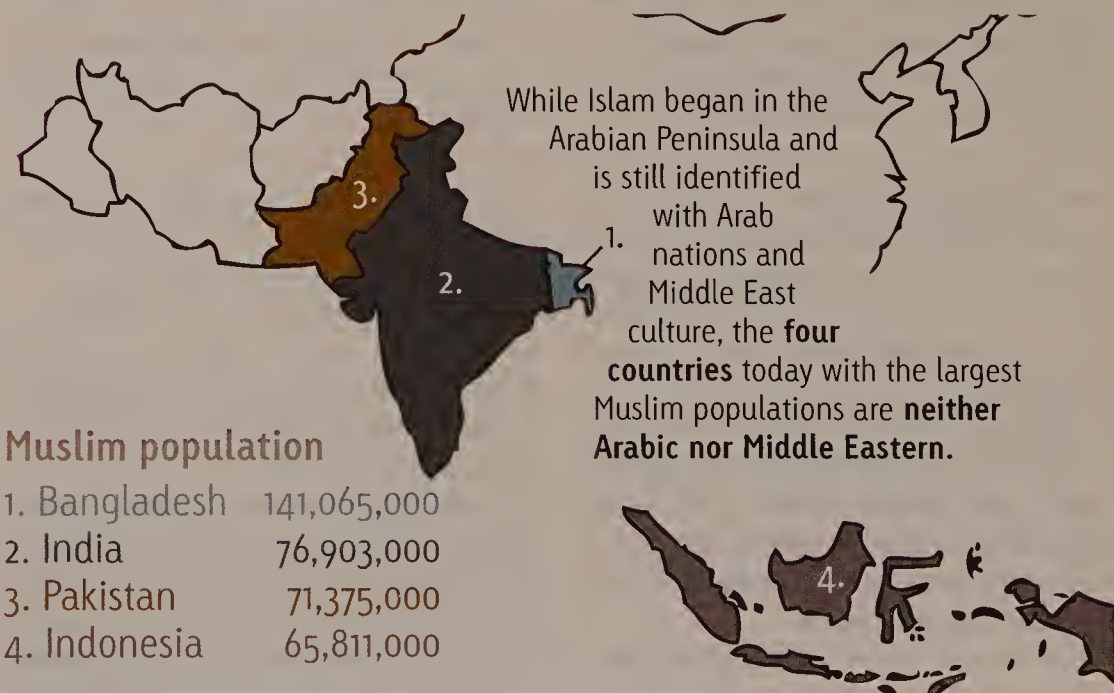
— Evangelist Billy Graham, 93 (*Huffington Post*, November 1)

In the past two years, investors have bought more than \$15 billion in subprime auto securities. "We think that investing in such companies is a ticking time bomb," says Joe Keefe from the socially responsible Pax World Management fund company. "It has ethical as well as systemic risk implications" (*Los Angeles Times*, October 30).

TRANSGENDER REALITY: Chaz Bono's appearance on ABC's *Dancing with the Stars* has made transgender issues

more public—and it appears that the public is fine with that. In an August survey, 89 percent of Americans agree that transgender persons deserve the same rights and protections as other Americans. Three quarters of those polled think that Congress should pass laws to protect them from job discrimination (65 percent of white evangelicals agreed). In a follow-up survey, those polled were given a chance to define transgender and more than two thirds gave correct replies (Public Religion Research Institute).

NON-ARABIC MUSLIM WORLD



SOURCE: ATLAS OF GLOBAL CHRISTIANITY, 1910-2010 (EDINBURGH UNIVERSITY PRESS)

Glimpse of the holy

by Kathleen Hirsch

A FEW YEARS ago, on All Saints' Eve, I decided that our family's Christmas season would be simple and, insofar as was possible with a toddler in the family, spirit-centered. Still green to parenting, I defined *spiritual* as anything that reduced my to-do list by half and allowed me a minute to reflect on what, beyond the laundry, mattered.

By Thanksgiving I'd turned off the television. There would be no *Arthur* or video versions of *Winnie-the-Pooh* this Advent.

Every morning of Advent, we opened a door on the calendar and then, over our Cheerios, talked about whatever came up: the wise men on their trek, the guidance of stars, a mother on a donkey. After I picked up my son from a morning at day care, we'd share a quiet lunch and spend afternoons reading Christmas picture books, baking gingerbread men indoors and making snowmen outdoors. Nothing was rushed. There was no stumbling past shopping mall Santas, no staring at TV ads, no frantic filling of empty time or panic over last-minute wrapping.

Each afternoon was more peaceful than the one before. Surprisingly, the work of the season seemed to take care of itself. While we baked and painted, screwed on lids and bagged up parcels for family and friends, I felt grace ripening our preparations into a quiet expectancy.

On the Sunday before Christmas we put up the tree and added new paper chains. After dinner we would set up the crèche and arrange the stable animals in their places of honor, ready for the arrival of the baby Jesus.

I was potting the last of the jam when my son disappeared from the kitchen. I

heard rummaging in the living room, then the metallic tinkle of ornaments on the lower boughs. Minutes later he was standing beside me, a solemn three-year-old holding a stuffed red heart that he'd taken from the tree.

"Mommy," he announced. "Pretend that I am Gabriel."

My young son was far better attuned than I to the ways the sacred speaks.

I looked at the chocolate around his lips, the sleeves of his Henley rolled up for wings, and his utterly sincere and serious eyes.

"Kneel down, Mommy," he instructed me.

I obliged. Gabriel and I were face-to-face, inches apart, in front of the stove.

"Mary," he addressed me. "You shall have a son. And this," he extended the plush red heart toward my face. "This is your holy."

Here, he paused for emphasis. "You must carry your holy with you always, Mommy—even around your neck—so that Jesus will know that he is holy too."

I looked at the heart offering, velvet and gold, resting in my hand. What to do with the hot coals of a prophet?

Then, perhaps overcome by the force of his own inspiration, my Gabriel turned and fled back to the crèche to distribute more of the "holy" to the creatures assembled there.

Slowly I got to my feet. For a moment my son had seen heaven and had offered me a glimpse. Not long out of diapers, he had lanced the literal with the intuition of a sage. Truth's vital core, the beckoning center of everything, is its holiness.

Without the holy, life—even simplified, even with terrific gingerbread and jam—is dust.

I looked at the heart again. My world doesn't involve a lot of angel sightings, but as I reflected on what had just transpired, I realized that my world didn't leave much room for wonder either. My

son was far better attuned to the ways in which the sacred speaks. It comes to us on the wing; it grazes the heart. Only after long contemplation does it coalesce into something that we can put words to.

"Lest you become like children, you won't enter the kingdom of heaven," the words rang in my ears.

Who deserves such breathtaking moments? Certainly not I, satisfied as I was with a season of reduced consumption and expanded calm. Holiness is wilder and less easily corralled, vaster than picture books and recipes. It erupts into the mundane order of our days and reveals whatever inside of us is on intimate terms with the divine. This was what my son had been trying to tell me.

In *Paul*, his book about the life of the apostle, N. T. Wright argues that Jesus first became conscious of his own inner nature when he stood in the Jordan River and the hand of John poured water down on his head. At that

Kathleen Hirsch is adjunct professor at Boston College and a colleague at the Bethany House of Prayer in Arlington, Massachusetts.

moment, scripture tells us, a dove descended from on high and named his human divinity.

Now I understood this with new insight, because somehow Gabriel had descended upon my son and entered his awareness as a viable messenger bearing an essential truth. Sometimes visions crash through from another realm and we are changed. We need the awakenings that bridge our fractured, hurried lives to something vast, whole and not wholly knowable. The learning that comes with these experiences enables us to see the holy in our midst. This is what the incarnation is all about. To the extent that we carry this awareness and the memory of such moments, our chil-

dren will carry it too. The intensity of these visions can't be sustained—even by the likes of Moses and Paul. But the visions make us aware that our days are the altars of our lives. We can lavish wonder on them or spill the wastes of our distracted days. Hopefully we will become messengers of the heart, sending one another out into the world in new awareness of the other realm in which we move and are held.

God needs our witness to the holy, needs us to uphold the sacred in creation. Without our tangible gestures, our rituals and icons informed by faith and wonder, we'll again become mired in the realm of common sense, estranged from mystery by mere knowledge.

That New Year's Eve we were invited to the home of friends. While the adults polished off a curry supper, my son and his friend Perry enjoyed a scavenger hunt and a run of combat, then curled up to watch *101 Dalmatians* and *Benjamin Bunny*—a real bonanza for my video-starved child. By ten o'clock the children were limp with exhaustion, and we found them tangled in sheets on the floor of Perry's bedroom. As I knelt down for a goodnight kiss, my son took my hand.

"Christmas is long, Mommy," he said, suddenly alert. "What are we going to do with all the years?"

After we get a good night's sleep, I told him, we'll be ready to watch for more sightings of the holy in the morning. **CC**

Miroslav Volf meets evangelical critics

Two faiths, one God?

by G. Jeffrey MacDonald

YALE THEOLOGIAN Miroslav Volf believes that Christians and Muslims worship the same God. On November 3 he took that argument to Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, an evangelical hub, and found that few were persuaded by his argument.

Volf drew large crowds of admirers on the campus in South Hamilton, Massachusetts, but audience members challenged the thesis put forward in his 2011 book, *Allah: A Christian Response*. For many of them, accepting Volf's stance would mean renouncing core beliefs.

"If I believe that Jesus Christ is God, then I can't deny that particular aspect of who God is," said Curt Kenney, an M.Div. student seeking ordination in the Presbyterian Church in America. "Muslims deny that Christ was God and that he was resurrected. I don't know how you get around that."

Volf made his case in a keynote address, which was followed by a faculty panel and conversation with students. He framed his "same God" argument as a type of "political theology," not as a statement on what's required for salvation.

In Volf's view, Christians and Muslims

God, albeit in different ways. Doing so opens doors to much-needed cooperation in today's interconnected world.

"If [Christians and Muslims] worship two different gods, two incompatible gods, I think the consequence is that they inhabit two incompatible moral universes," Volf

At Gordon-Conwell, students resisted Volf's "same God" argument.

agree on key claims about God: that God is One, that God is the Creator, distinct from the creation, and that God is the giver of moral codes found in the Ten Commandments. Because Christian and Muslim claims about God's nature and attributes bear much (though not complete) similarity, Volf contended, they may affirm that they worship the same

said. "Consequently, they will never be able to agree on moral terms on what it means to live well under a common roof."

Gordon-Conwell ethicist John Jefferson Davis observed that this argument can be hard to sell to evangelicals. "Part

G. Jeffrey MacDonald is a freelance writer in Massachusetts.

of your intended audience is conservative Protestant evangelical Christians here, who in many cases have negative attitudes toward Islam," Davis said. "In many mainline Protestant denominations, [the notion that] we all worship the same God is obviously true, almost without debate. But in a context like this, it is not without debate."

Volf tried to assure listeners that affirming a common God doesn't necessarily undercut efforts to evangelize. It could, he argued, even create settings in which more Muslims would choose to follow Christ as Lord and Savior.

"Any environment in which there is no hostility is also a good environment for evangelism," Volf said.

Students, faculty and local pastors listened politely, then asked questions. In hallways afterward, they offered reasons why they can't affirm that Christians and Muslims worship the same God.

"At stake is the gospel," said student Andrew Kerhoulas. "If you are saying to a Muslim, 'See there is common ground

between us, and then there will be peace,' essentially you have nullified the need for the gospel . . . You're saying that the gospel doesn't matter in order to have a relationship with God."

Volf pushed back on the notion that Muslims must worship a different God because they don't regard Christ as divine. He asked rhetorically: Do Jews also worship a different God, since they too don't see Jesus as God incarnate? To say so would be heretical, Volf said, since Christianity has long affirmed that Hebrew scripture points to God. To use the same argument to exclude the Muslim God would be equally baseless, he said.

Not everyone was persuaded. Some insisted that even though Hebrew scripture is Christian scripture, those who lack faith in Jesus Christ—whether Jewish, Muslim or atheist—still aren't right with God.

"I took issue with [Volf's] tying together Jews and Muslims, because we need to

evangelize Jews," said student Will Anderson. "Putting Muslims in the same camp as Jews, or saying they affirm what Jews affirm, what door does that open? . . . I want to live peaceably with Muslims not for the sake of peace, but for the sake of [living] in proximity where I can give my life for the gospel of Jesus Christ, so that they may know Jesus Christ."

As the day wore on, some listeners saw merit in his project while others decided Volf was doing a disservice to the faith. Among the skeptics was Nigerian pastor Peter Johnson, who is pursuing a master's degree in Old Testament in order to evangelize Nigerian Muslims, whom he said are more open to reading the Old Testament than the New Testament. He worries that Christians who are weak in their faith will give up in hard times if they assume, using arguments such as Volf's, that following Christ is not necessary in order to be right with God.

"There is life beyond this life," Johnson said. "The hope beyond this life is based only on relationship with Jesus Christ. That is the belief of scripture, and that is my conviction. So if you say you accept Islam, then you affirm something that doesn't offer you rewards after this life, which is dangerous."

Others found Volf's message encouraging. Gordon-Conwell graduate Preston Clarkson plans to relocate soon to the Middle East with his family in order to serve the Arab church. After hearing Volf, he said he believes Christians and Muslims "attempt to worship the same God," and he believes such a charitable understanding helps advance interfaith relations.

"There's only one God, even though we have different understandings, and that's the basis for partnerships," Clarkson said.

Volf allowed that even though both groups worship the same God, not all modes of worship are equally valid.

"What does it mean to rightly worship the right God?" Volf asked. "I think there, the whole question of salvation, soteriology, presence of the Spirit and role of Christ comes rushing in. Rightly worshiping God is to worship in the Spirit, is to come to Allah through Jesus Christ, is to come to God on the basis of being accepted by God through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross." **CC**

Ladder

I walked down to the shore this morning,
sun still low on the sea;
another had been there before me,
making tracks
that made straight for the waves.

Brown pelicans came with their ripples and ribbons;
sanderlings and sandpipers
kept darting, drilling the sand; under a breaker
a conch lay broken and blazing,
a ladder curving back to the deep.

A pair of burred pufferfish, hides starred and striped,
were curing to tanned leather,
lips and eyes sewn tight in the glare.

Then a four-wheel came, and exhaust
and dark clouds swept the ocean away,

leaving only the sun at my feet,
following the swells in and out,
each step
stamping a small fire in the wet,
the burn of the surf too bright now to face.

Steve Lautermilch

Pearl of great price

by Suzanne Guthrie

ACCORDING TO family lore, my mother said that she didn't go to church because she was a Quaker. But when a Quaker meeting came to the rural town where we lived and her parents drew attention to the fact that she still didn't go to church, she finally confessed that she was an agnostic. By that time my grandparents had settled into a Presbyterian church while my father attended an Episcopal church with us kids. My mother stayed home to take a bath and read the Sunday paper.

Yet my mother insisted that we go to church. "You can accept or reject religion when you are adults, but if you don't have exposure to it, you won't know what you're accepting or rejecting." She was horrified, however, when in early adulthood I not only accepted religion but also made the church my life. Her argument: you are rejecting other religions if you choose Christianity, and you are too intelligent to choose Christianity!

I agreed that Christianity was an imperfect choice. But I didn't accept her argument. I had to choose a Way or I wouldn't get anywhere. Say that I wanted to get to Boston, I said; going by train doesn't mean I didn't appreciate automobiles, airplanes or bikes.

"Theology is based upon unwarranted assumptions," she liked to say. Nevertheless, when I was 11, she had inadvertently taught me to value my faith as the pearl of great price.

I loved church. I loved singing Anglican chant and hymns. I loved the stained glass windows, the scent of the old wooden building and sunlight on the boxwood outside and beeswax candles inside. I adored the Book of Common Prayer—the ennobling of daily life in gorgeous Shakespearean cadences and the intimacy of "Thou." Thou art. Thine own. Thy handmaiden. Thy Kingdom come.

Lifelong longing for God already infused my pilgrim heart, and the second pew on the right was not close enough. I wanted to go to the altar rail for communion, which in those days was denied to anyone who was not confirmed. And so at the age of 11 I petitioned our minister to let me prepare for confirmation in the spring instead of waiting until I was 14. Every Saturday my mother drove me to Saint James for catechism.

As my father was unemployed, the household atmosphere that spring was tense but secure. My family never borrowed money. We saved. I remember the "tsk tsk" of disapproval when a cousin bought a washer and dryer "on credit"—meaning, to us, that she eventually had to pay more money for the appliances. I was sympathetic. My cousin had five children—how could she manage without a washing machine? But that was not the way our family did things. What we didn't have money for we could wait for or do without.

All spring my grandmother bullied me about my faith. "You might as well be Catholic!" she hissed, which was for her the worst heresy of all, despite the fact that she liked the cousin who was Roman Catholic even though she bought her washer and dryer on credit.

Standing up to my grandmother helped me define for myself what I loved about the Episcopal church and the sacraments. But I also enjoyed going to the Presbyterian church with my grandparents for the splendid music, challenging sermons, a much better education program and youth programs that I enjoyed until I went away to college. But I always missed the sacrament. I knew and understood what I was missing because I had had to stand up to my grandmother.


Once, later in my life, my drunken

grandmother said, "If Jesus could see what you Episcopalians do to his religion, he'd be rolling in his gravel!" She tried to make out why we laughed. "Nanny! That's the whole point. The tomb was empty . . ." But until she died she still nursed a grudge against "bowing and scraping and kneeling" and the drinking of real wine instead of grape juice in little cups.

The scent of port wine, the sense of Presence, the red sanctuary light and the unknown lured me from the second pew on the right. I found my way to the altar rail and was confirmed. Not long after that, by age 13, I realized I wanted to journey to the pulpit and to the altar.

A few weeks before my confirmation my mother and I walked by J. C. Penney's on the way to buy groceries. A manikin in the window displayed a lovely white confirmation dress. The dress clearly existed solely for church—not for parties or summer. I walked by knowing we couldn't afford such a luxury. But my mother stopped.

"Would you like that dress for your confirmation? Do you want to try it on?" asked my mother.

It didn't occur to me that I would get to wear a special dress. I tried it on and felt more special than I'd ever felt before. We went home that day with that extravagant pearl-white dress in a box. If prayer, my vows, the altar rail, the bishop's laying of hands upon my head and my first communion did not make me holy, the way I felt in that expensive, once-in-a-lifetime dress would. 

Suzanne Guthrie, a writer and Episcopal priest, creates a weekly lectionary retreat at edgeofenclosure.org. She lives with the sisters of the Community of the Holy Spirit on their farm in Brewster, New York.

Atheists organize at religious colleges

Late one night over pizza, University of Dayton students Branden King and Nick Haynes discovered neither of them believed in God. Surely, they thought, they couldn't be the only nonbelievers at the Roman Catholic college.

Last year, King and Haynes and a couple of other like-minded students applied to the administration to form the Society of Freethinkers, a student club based on matters of unbelief.

The university rejected their application—and rejected it again this past September. Without university approval, the group cannot meet on campus, tap a student activities fund, participate in campus events or use campus media. For now, the group meets at a cafe off campus, relying on word of mouth to draw members, up to about 15 now. And they are appealing the rejection.

"A religious campus can be a lonely place for someone who doesn't subscribe to faith," said King, now 23 and a graduate student in biology. "We want to reach out to these people."

The Dayton students are not alone. The Secular Student Alliance, a national organization of nontheistic students with 320 campus chapters, reports that at least two other religious universities—Notre Dame and Baylor—have rejected clubs for atheist, agnostic, humanist and other nontheistic students. Students at Duquesne University, a Catholic school, say they have little hope of approval on their first application this year.

All the schools say they rejected the clubs because they conflict with their Christian mission—which perplexes some students, who note that Duquesne, Dayton and Notre Dame gave approval to Muslim and Jewish student clubs. Dayton and Duquesne have also approved of gay student groups.

"The only difference between us and them is our club's agenda does not assume the existence of the Judeo-Christian God," said Stephen Love, 21, a Notre Dame student whose application was rejected twice. "I think those clubs should be allowed, but if they are going to use that line of reasoning to reject us, they should be consistent."

James Fitz, Dayton's vice president, said the school can support a gay student club without condoning the members' sexual orientation. Approving non-Catholic religious clubs is also acceptable, because faith in God is involved.

"As a Marianist university we aspire 'to educate for formation in faith,'" he wrote in an e-mail, quoting Marianist principles.

Many students say their peers are supportive of their nontheistic clubs. Others have asked why, if they do not believe in God, they chose a religious school in the first place.

Haynes and King came to Dayton after attending Catholic high schools. Andrew Tripp, president of DePaul University's Alliance for Free Thought, liked DePaul's urban setting and its service to Chicago's poor. Brandi Stepp said that as an atheist she worried about choosing DePaul but was drawn by the reputation of the theater department.

"I thought I might have to keep my mouth shut about a lot of things," she said. "I was really interested in finding a community of like-minded people. I saw the SSA ad, showed up and had a great time."

Not all religious schools reject nontheist clubs. California Lutheran University has an active group that regularly cooperates with religious groups on campus, and DePaul has a thriving group that meets with administration support.

"Once they realized we were not going to march on the president's office demanding the de-Catholization of the



OFF-SITE DISCUSSION: Nick Haynes (center) and Branden King (second from right) lead an off-campus meeting of the Society of Freethinkers at the University of Dayton, where school administrators have refused to give the group official recognition.

university they were very amenable to our goals,” said Tripp. Suzanne Kilgannon, director of DePaul’s Office of Student Involvement, said the club’s goal of open inquiry into matters of faith—and nonfaith—conforms to the school’s Catholic mission.

“We looked at it as: we are the marketplace of ideas, so how could we not have an organization like this?” she said. “Because it is important to study all sides of the subject—regardless of the subject—we felt like this club belonged here.”

Other religious schools have arrived at the same conclusion. There are sanctioned Secular Student Alliance chapters at Southern Methodist University, Luther College, Presbyterian College and Iowa’s Central College. Jesse Galef,

SSA’s communications director, said some religious universities misunderstand the purpose of nontheist clubs. It isn’t to promote atheism, he said, but to provide “a safe place” for students exploring nonbelief.

“Secular student groups promote discussion, and community and compassion,” Galef said. “If the University of Dayton and other schools value these things, they need to stop refusing secular students the same rights religious students have.”

Galef has heard from Baylor students who said they felt threatened with expulsion because of their lack of faith. The Baylor Atheist/Agnostic Society continues to meet, organizing through a private Facebook page with 69 mem-

bers. No one in the group would agree to be interviewed.

Nick Shadowen, a philosophy major who proposed a secular society at Duquesne and is currently awaiting the administration’s decision, sees a gap between religious and nonreligious students.

“A lot of students come from small, conservative towns centered around church where there is not a lot of discussion about atheists, and so they are sort of forced to keep their opinion to themselves,” he said. “This group is a chance to show the rest of the student body we are just like everyone else.”

—Kimberly Winston, RNS

Nonbelievers find niche at California Lutheran

EVAN CLARK chose to attend California Lutheran University even though he wasn’t sure how he might fit in as an atheist at a religious school. But when Clark, now 23, and a handful of other students sought to establish a nonbelievers’ club, they were approved by both student government and the administration, despite the school’s affiliation with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America.

“The mission statement of the university is to further faith and reason,” Clark said. “They are very open to communicating about religion, to not saying ‘it is my way or the highway.’ So we fit right in with that mission—that we are going to talk about matters of faith so you will be stronger in your beliefs.”

The Cal Lutheran chapter of the Secular Student Alliance started in 2009. It is now one of the most active clubs on the campus in Thousand Oaks, California, joining other groups for events based on both faith and non-belief.

With a Catholic group, club members visited a Catholic church. They celebrated a Jewish holiday with a Jewish group. They have visited a Sikh gurdwara and a Mormon temple and discussed Wiccan and Unitarian

Universalist beliefs with members of those faiths.

“What I appreciate most about the group is its willingness to explore what makes believers tick,” said William Bersley, one of the group’s faculty advisers. “This aspect of tolerant inquiry into faith and compassionate service seems to belie the more monstrous caricatures of atheists.”

Not everyone is so impressed. Campus pastor Scott Maxwell-Doherty said when the SSA was allowed to use the chapel to host an atheist speaker, some religious students felt a line had been crossed. “We said we’ve got to work at this together,” he said of the decision to approve the group. “Because if you are going to go out there in the world, you have to understand the bandwidth.”

Clark has heard from students at other religious schools where officials have not embraced nontheistic student clubs.

“They are losing out on an opportunity for positive dialogue with people who have different views,” he said. “It blows my mind that some campuses would not allow this. If we did this with a Muslim group or a Jewish group, it would be blatantly wrong, but with non-believers it is OK? That is sad.” —RNS

Cardinal’s claim disputed by Catholic theologian

An unusual public dispute is brewing between Washington Cardinal Donald Wuerl and a feminist theologian who essentially accused Wuerl of lying about the hierarchy’s review of her work.

The feud between Sister Elizabeth Johnson and the doctrine committee of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops—which Wuerl heads—escalated in late October following the committee’s renewed criticism of Johnson’s landmark book, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God*.

Wuerl charged on October 29 that Johnson failed to respond to three offers to meet with him to discuss the dispute. Johnson responded by saying she was “aghast” at how Wuerl depicted the deteriorating relationship and said Wuerl should retract the statement “for the sake of [his] own reputation for truth-telling, and for the good of the church.”

A spokeswoman for the USCCB, which has handled the communications for Wuerl and the doctrine committee, said the cardinal would have no further statement. The correspondence between Wuerl and Johnson was posted shortly thereafter on the blog of *Commonweal* magazine, a leading liberal Catholic publication.

The rare public exchange marks the latest chapter in a months-long clash that has worsened already tense rela-

RNS / JAY PREMACK
tions between the Catholic bishops and theologians.

The saga began last March when Wuerl's nine-member doctrine committee released a sweeping critique of Johnson's book. The condemnation stunned theologians and Johnson, a professor of systematic theology at Fordham University in New York, in part because the book had been so well received since its publication in 2007 and also because Johnson was given no notice about the investigation.

The hierarchy's own guidelines call for open dialogue with theologians whose work may be suspect before pronouncements are issued. But USCCB officials said in March that the popularity of Johnson's book demanded immediate action and that the yearlong review of her work had to be conducted in secret.

Johnson expressed dismay at the negative verdict on her work and asked to meet with the committee. In June she sent the panel a 38-page defense of her work.

On October 28, the doctrine committee released a statement reiterating their disapproval of the book, which it said did not pay sufficient heed to earlier Catholic traditions on how to conceptualize God. The bishops charge that the book also uses "ambiguous" terms that could be open to misinterpretation, such as female images for the divine.

In response, Johnson expressed "sadness" and "disappointment" and again said she felt the bishops misunderstood her work and that she has always espoused "the church's faith about God revealed in Jesus Christ through the Spirit." Johnson also lamented that the doctrinal committee did not take up her offer to meet to discuss their differences.

That led Wuerl to issue an unusual statement on October 29, posted at the USCCB website, saying the cardinal had offered to meet with Johnson three times, in correspondence sent July 22 and October 11 and in a telephone call and follow-up email on October 26. "Sister Johnson did not respond to any of the offers," Wuerl said.

But the exchanges posted at *Commonweal* quotes Johnson writing to Wuerl July 14 to say: "I assure you explicitly of my willingness to meet face-to-face to clarify these matters, and in fact would like to do so, should you deem that helpful."



THEOLOGICAL FEUD: Archbishop Donald Wuerl has led the bishop's confrontation with Sister Elizabeth Johnson.

Wuerl replied on July 22, saying that the committee would review her response. "The next meeting of the committee is set for September and as soon as possible following the meeting I will get word to you," Wuerl wrote Johnson, adding: "I would welcome the opportunity to meet with you."

The next time Wuerl contacted Johnson was in a letter dated October 11, to inform her that the committee had concluded its response, set for release on October 28. Wuerl added, "I renew my offer to meet with you if you so desire."

Johnson is on sabbatical this fall and did not receive the letter. On October 25—with the committee's response set to be published—Wuerl's secretary emailed Johnson. She responded the next day, but the doctrine committee said it was too late to change the bishops' statement or arrange a meeting.

After Wuerl posted his statement saying that Johnson failed to respond and that he was renewing his offer to meet with her himself, Johnson fired back. "I am aghast at the accusation you make in the USCCB website post that I have not responded to any of the offers to meet," Johnson wrote to Wuerl in an e-mail.

"I never received an offer to meet at a definite time or with a protocol or agenda that would ensure serious discussion of the issues in my book," Johnson wrote. "If I had, I would have accepted immediately. In addition, each offer was vague about time, indicating that a meeting would take place after the committee's deliberations were over." —David Gibson, RNS

Kinnamon leaving NCC for health reasons

Michael Kinnamon, a longtime ecumenical leader who has headed the National Council of Churches since 2007, announced that he will leave his post as general secretary of the New York-based NCC, following the advice of his cardiologist.

Kinnamon, 63, said that his physician insisted that the stress of his work, including its travel demands, must be reduced immediately and significantly, according to a November 9 statement by the NCC.

The announcement from Kinnamon "comes at a challenging time for the life of the council," said NCC president Peg Chamberlin, "but we're encouraged that Michael is willing to work with us on this important transition and be a resource to us going forward."

The National Council, founded in 1950, has 37 member communions including Protestant, Anglican, Eastern Orthodox, historical African-American, evangelical and "peace church" denominations.

A clergyman in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Kinnamon has held an endowed chair at Eden Theological Seminary in St. Louis since 2000. He previously taught at Lexington Theological Seminary and Christian Theological Seminary.

Kinnamon brought his theological expertise to the Consultation on Church Union after playing major roles for the World Council of Churches in 1980s.

The National Council of Churches, despite financial difficulties and sometimes criticism over its progressive stances on social justice and peace issues, was reminded by Kinnamon that "unity is not synonymous with agreement." To applause at his last election as the NCC's top executive, he said, "We can fight like cats and dogs and still sit at the same table."

An NCC task force will draft a separation agreement for the council's executive committee, which meets in December. Chamberlin and president-elect Kathryn Lohre said that they will develop a proposal for NCC leadership during the time of transition.

Clergy, politicians find out how far food stamps go

Religious leaders and members of Congress were getting a firsthand taste of what it's like to eat on \$4.50 a day as part of the Food Stamp Challenge in Washington. In the challenge, participants try to live for a week on the average amount received by people who use food stamps, known as the federal Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP).

"We do need to put ourselves sometimes in other people's shoes so we can

really feel what they have to go through every day," said Donna Christensen, a Democrat who represents the U.S. Virgin Islands as a nonvoting delegate. The Food Stamp Challenge is part of Fighting Poverty with Faith, an annual interfaith initiative endorsed by 50 national religious organizations.

This year is a particularly critical one for the cause, faith leaders said, because Congress is considering significant cuts to the more than \$64 billion program.

On October 27, religious and political leaders teamed up with current SNAP recipients to shop at a Safeway grocery store near Capitol Hill.

One of them was Peg Chamberlin, president of the National Council of Churches and a former adviser to the White House's Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships.

Several decades ago, unable to find a job after leaving a seminary program, Chamberlin signed up for food stamps. But she said she had forgotten what it is like to shop on such a tight budget. "No soda, no magazines, no coffee," said Chamberlin. She tried not to look at the donuts, croissants and Doritos. "Absolutely no specialty items," she said.

Chamberlin shopped with Vernell Livingston, 72, a local resident whose only sources of income are Social Security payments and SNAP.

At one point, Chamberlin suggested some \$6.99 beef patties to Livingston, who shook her head and said, "No, no, no, no." She selected less-expensive ground turkey instead, which she planned to eat with cheese on 99-cent wheat bread for dinner.

At another point, Livingston put a \$1.29 can of Campbell's chicken noodle soup in her cart and then opted for a generic chicken noodle soup for 89 cents.

Livingston's three small bags of groceries totaled \$29.93, just under the average SNAP allotment of \$31.50 per week.

Although SNAP is called a "nutritional assistance" program, good nutrition may be unattainable for many of those receiving benefits.

Chamberlin said she wished Livingston could have bought more fruits and vegetables, "because it's clear she's very oriented toward eating healthily, but we had to choose between fruits and vegetables and protein."

"The health risks are terrible, when you look at sugar, sodium and fats in the foods you must buy on \$4.50 a day," said Rep. Barbara Lee (D., Calif.), who once received food stamps as a single mother.

Eleanor Holmes Norton, a Democrat nonvoting delegate from Washington, D.C., said one in four families in the nation's capital are on SNAP. Since the beginning of the recession, she noted, the number of those on SNAP nationally rose from 27 million to 44 million, and nearly half are children.

Eight members of Congress, all Democrats, agreed to take the Food Stamp Challenge. —Josef Kuhn, RNS

White House flubs Bible, like everyone else

THE WHITE HOUSE proved itself scripturally challenged recently when Press Secretary Jay Carney said: "I believe the phrase from the Bible is, 'The Lord helps those who help themselves.'"

Actually, no.

The phrase, often attributed to the Bible, most likely comes from Benjamin Franklin and possibly from the ancient Greeks. The White House felt obligated to add a note to the transcript of Carney's briefing: "This common phrase does not appear in the Bible."

Embarrassing perhaps, but not uncommon. It may make Carney feel better to learn that he's got company—a lot of it—with other Americans. Numerous polls have shown that most Americans believe the phrase is straight from the Bible.

Christian pollster George Barna has asked Americans repeatedly about the saying and consistently found that a majority attributes it to the Bible. In 2000, 75 percent of Americans surveyed by Barna attributed the phrase to the Bible.

Comedian Jay Leno once challenged passersby to name one of the Ten Commandments for the *Tonight Show*. The most popular answer? "God helps those who help themselves."

(Another wrong guess given to Leno was, "Let whoever is without sin cast the first stone." That one's actually in the Bible—John 8:7—but even that episode

with the memorable Jesus quote is bracketed in the NRSV Bible as absent from most ancient texts of John.)

The White House flub occurred November 2 when Carney was trying to back up his boss, who had chided Congress for passing a resolution to reaffirm "In God We Trust" as the nation's motto rather than passing his jobs bill. "I trust in God, but God wants to see us help ourselves by putting people back to work," President Obama said.

The press secretary "certainly deserves a bit of ribbing, because people attribute to the Bible all kinds of stuff," said Dale Martin, professor of religious studies at Yale University. "They should be more careful." But even Bible teachers can slip up—"everybody does it," Martin added.

So where does the idea that "the Lord helps those who help themselves" really come from?

The earliest records of a similar phrase seem to go back to the ancient Greeks. Aeschylus wrote in his play *The Persians*: "Whenever a man makes haste, God too hastens with him."

Over time, other traditions have enshrined the idea. In Islam, for example, the prophet Mohammad is believed to have said: "Trust in God but tie your camel."

The most common attribution comes from Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanac* in 1757. —Lauren Markoe, RNS

Seminaries look to update ministers' skill set

For more than 200 years, Andover Newton Theological School has trained future pastors to have expertise in biblical studies, pastoral care and preaching. But the nation's oldest school of theology has decided that in today's world, that is no longer enough, and other schools are starting to agree.

Under a recent curriculum overhaul, ANTS students must prove competency in key skills for the 21st-century church, including high-tech communication and interfaith collaboration. Students still study theology, but unless they can use it to help others find meaning, they don't graduate.

"This is not a case for fine-tuning the [educational] model," Andover Newton President Nick Carter said at a regional meeting October 23 of the United Church of Christ. "We really have to reinvent it; the profession has totally changed."

Andover Newton's new standards are part of a larger movement to reconsider what future pastors need to learn. Curriculum revisions are underway at about a quarter of the 262 institutions in the Association of Theological Schools, according to ATS Executive Director Daniel Aleshire.

A generation ago, seminaries were less eager for curriculum reform as they felt pastors could learn practical skills on the job, Aleshire said. But now, churches increasingly need pastors to arrive ready to tackle a myriad of challenges, from addressing alcoholism and domestic violence to creating access for the disabled.

"A lot of schools are rethinking how they educate religious leaders," said Aleshire. "There is a perception that ministry education is not just the accumulation of courses in the old disciplinary patterns. It has to be something more dynamic."

Around the country, schools are testing new approaches to theological education. In California, Claremont School of Theology encourages would-be Christian pastors to take some courses alongside future rabbis and imams at an

institution named Claremont Lincoln University.

In Illinois, Meadville Lombard Theological School reformed its curriculum to help students at the Unitarian Universalist seminary get more hands-on ministry experience early in their education.

In Catholic seminaries, Aleshire noted, curricula have evolved over the past 20 years to help future priests reflect on issues of identity and "celibacy as a way of life and ministry."

"You might not find a course with that title," Aleshire said, "but if you looked at what they did over seven days (in their studies), you'd find a lot of time spent on those issues."

Curriculum reform is driven by several forces, Aleshire said. Since more and more students have jobs and are attending seminary part-time, they need courses to be interchangeable and not part of a rigid sequence. And because churchgoers and seminarians come from ever-more diverse religious backgrounds, pastoral training is evolving to help them engage multiple traditions.

Schools are experimenting to figure out what works. At Andover Newton, students learn "interpretation" in a way that covers more than Christian readings of the Bible, such as studying the Old Testament alongside rabbinic students from nearby Hebrew College.

The broader approach helps prepare future pastors to function effectively in a pluralistic world where Christian assumptions can't be taken for granted, Carter said. "It actually turned out better rabbis and better Christian ministers when we were able to deal with the difficult texts" from each other's traditions, Carter said.

As training takes new forms, benchmarks are evolving as well. To evaluate curriculum reforms, ANTS administrators plan to contact congregations that are led by ANTS alumni. They'll ask how well pastors are doing in key competency areas, such as "embodiment," which expects pastors to practice what they preach and offer a convincing witness.

Based on what they hear, Carter said, the school will continue to tweak the program so that churches get the kinds of ministers they need. —G. Jeffrey MacDonald, RNS



'NO MALARIA' DONATION: Bill and Melinda Gates, in collaboration with the United Nations Foundation, have given a \$3 million boost for administrative costs in the United Methodists' Imagine No Malaria fund-raising campaign. The grant, lifting the fund total above \$18 million, is expected to result in tangible results in Angola and Zimbabwe following a successful model developed in Sierra Leone. Shown above are volunteers in Sierra Leone hanging a mosquito net at a home last December in Koribondo Village.

UNITED METHODIST NEWS SERVICE / MIKE DUBOSE

Tokyo interfaith panel eyes new suicide views

Japan, which has one of the highest suicide rates among developed countries, is increasingly using the term for “voluntary death” instead of “killing oneself.”

Indeed, Roman Catholic Archbishop Peter Takeo Okada of Tokyo, says he has approved of the term “voluntary death,” noting that “since the church had taught for a long time that suicide is a sin, we had not held funerals for suicides.”

An interfaith symposium in Tokyo, sponsored by the Catholic Bishops Conference in Japan, explored on October 29 the shifting attitudes of Japanese religious communities on suicide, including whether the term should be changed to “voluntary death.” The symposium was titled “The Mission of Religionists on Voluntary Death.”

One of four panelists, Wataru Kaya, a Japanese Shinto priest and psychiatrist, emphasized the importance of prayers and compassion for those who die voluntarily, based on Japanese traditional cultures. He reiterated that Shintoism “does not see voluntary death as an absolute evil.”

But Hiroshi Saito, who heads the study office of the Institute of the Doctrine of Oomoto, a Sectarian Shinto sect formed in 1892, noted that Oomoto’s canon says, “Suicide is a sin among sins.” He warned, “By using the term ‘voluntary death,’ I am afraid that a sense of sin for committing suicide can be unconsciously weakened.”

Saito criticized views by José M. Bertolote, from the Department of Mental Health of the World Health Organization, expressed in a 2008 article in the *Economist*, that suicide in Japan is part of a culture that includes an “ethical standard to preserve one’s honor and to take responsibility by suicide.” Saito said, “these are rather biased views . . . few people in Japan today see suicide as a virtue.”

The World Health Organization has reported that about 26 per 100,000 people in Japan take their own lives, compared to nine per 100,000 for the United Kingdom and 11 per 100,000 in the United States. Causes include depression, health problems and economic pressures, according to Japan’s National Police Agency.

Daiki Nakashita, a Japanese priest of Otani sect of the True Pure Land School Buddhism, said that the role of religious communities should include “turning pains and wounds into connections” by “sharing the pains and wounds within groups of the bereaved” and “holding Buddhist memorial services for those who died voluntarily.”

In Japan, “motives to live seem to be getting weaker,” said Archbishop Okada, who is vice president of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference in Japan. “The mission of religionists is to give [people] the reason, motive and purpose of living.”

It was not until November last year that St. Ignatius Church, site of the symposium, started the St. Ignatius Project to Protect Life and held the first mass in Japan to remember those who died voluntarily and to care for bereaved family members and friends. —Hisashi Yukimoto, ENInews

Sudan churches stay united after political division of country

Despite this year’s vote by South Sudan for independence, churches in Sudan and South Sudan have decided to remain united, mainly to help denominations in Muslim-majority Sudan.

Bishops of the Roman Catholic Church on October 28 decided to maintain one conference covering the two states, alluding to shared history and existing “very real practical human links.” In July, the Episcopal Church decided to remain one body for the next two years, and the Sudan Council of Churches has also said it will not split.

“It’s more about solidarity,” observed John Ashworth, an advisor with the Sudan Ecumenical Forum, which enhances churches’ work for peace in Sudan, in an e-mail on November 3.

“They feel they are still united despite the political boundaries,” said Ashworth. Noting that Christianity is stronger in South Sudan, he commented that “the church in South Sudan will be much stronger and so in practice the church in Sudan will be supported by the South.”

Most Christians in the north are from the south, including most priests and 50 percent of the bishops, according to church officials. Two Roman Catholic dioceses are served by a cardinal and three bishops. “The north church is a ‘minority church’ that would very much need the South to remain intact,” explained Don Bosco Ochieng, a priest from Rumbek diocese in South Sudan.

“There are concerns about [the northern church’s] unknown future, given the north’s declaration as an Islamic state,” he said, referring to a statement made by Sudan president Omar al-Bashir on October 13.

Sudanese churches’ diocesan boundaries have not followed those of the political administration as is the case in many other African countries. The dioceses on the border between the two nations continue to include large areas on both sides, making it important for the churches to maintain unity, according to officials.

In October, Episcopal Bishop of Khartoum Ezekiel Kondo visited the U.S. and said that times are tense for Sudan’s Christians. Kondo met with the State Department and major nongovernmental organizations and spoke on a panel at an antigenocide conference, according to Episcopal News Service.

“As far as the north goes, the independence has brought a difference,” he said. Christian government officials and private sector workers have been laid off; the government is introducing full Islamic Shari’a law, and South Sudanese are not being given citizenship. People are leaving or being forced out, and the church in Khartoum has been diminished.

Additionally, there has been an influx of refugees from South Kordofan, an oil-producing state under northern control in central Sudan, where southern sympathizers have been under attack.

Though the United Nations has a presence in Khartoum, Sudan’s capital city, the government has declined to open camps for refugees, so people are staying with relatives, Kondo said.

“We were able to accommodate some [refugees] but not all,” he said. “We have organized special prayer for South Kordofan; collected food and clothes, because people just came—ran with their bodies but they got nothing out.” —ENInews

LIVING BY The Word

Sunday, December 4

Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8

I SAW DANNY this week. He was walking down Church Street in downtown New Haven, pretending he had somewhere to go. I knew better. Luckily I saw him in time and could slow my pace so that he didn't catch my eye. I didn't want to hear it from him again. Not yet.

Danny appeared on our porch on a cold December afternoon a couple of years ago, hat in hand. He was honest, at least. He'd been sleeping here and there since getting back into town, he said, mostly on the porch of the Red Cross headquarters across from the church. The people there didn't seem to mind, and he always cleared out before anyone arrived for work in the morning. He didn't want anyone to be frightened.

He needed some food, maybe some money for the bus. We'd just hung the Moravian Christmas star on our front porch and placed Advent candles in our windows. It was a pretty tough moment to refuse someone aid, so against my better judgment I dug into my wallet and found a few dollars. As he was leaving, Danny turned and looked me in the eye.

"Is this the way it's supposed to be?" he asked.

He was off before I could reply or even register what he'd said. He came back with one need or another throughout the winter and over the years that followed. Sometimes I'd give him some money or make a call to find him a place to live, but nothing seemed to work out for very long. I'd see him working downtown, selling newspapers in front of Bruegger's Bagels or washing windows on Chapel Street.

"Good morning, Reverend," he'd call out. His greeting would almost always be followed with his one-line sermon. "Reverend, is this the way it's supposed to be?"

I'd nod, as if Danny were doing just the right thing, working for a couple of dollars that were not just a handout. But he was asking much more than that, whether he knew it or not. The question still haunts me. Is creation in perfect order? Is the society supposed to abide some people living on the margins? Is it OK that some are so poor that they must beg while others walk briskly off to their shining offices? Those were questions I didn't want to engage.

I don't like Danny. I don't like the kind of relationship we have, built as it is on his need and my reluctant response. I don't like his appearing at my door or at a coffee shop at times when I don't expect to see him. And I don't like the one-line sermon that he insists on delivering, especially in Advent, when that odd character John appears in the

wilderness. John too has a one-line sermon, right out of Isaiah.

"Is this the way it's supposed to be?" he cries. "Prepare the way of the Lord. Make God's paths straight!"

People look at him as if he's crazy. They offer him some bread to go with his wild honey. They give him money for a bus ticket, hoping that he'll land a real job. They, like us, would prefer simply to hear about wonderful Jesus.

"Tell us stories of a young family on a long journey," they ask. "Talk to us about the child soon to be born in a stable built for animals."

"You are not ready for that story," John insists. "Remember Isaiah. Every valley will be lifted up. There will be equity for the meek, justice for the poor. *Then* the glory of the Lord shall be revealed."

I don't know about you, but I stand back from such fantasy. I slow my pace and let it pass by without catching my eye, because even daring to imagine a new creation where the powerful are brought low and the meek made powerful—a world where everything that we know about the natural order is placed on its head—seems terribly dangerous to me. Daring to hope for such a new creation requires the sort of self-reflection on this creation and on my life that I'm not anxious to endure.

In other words, I want the good news of Christmas without the challenge. I want the birth narrative without the prophet. I want redemption without judgment.

Danny, whom I expect to see on my front porch any day now, probably knocks on lots of doors and engages in lots of conversations with strangers. I wonder if he reserves his theological challenge, "Is this the way things are supposed to be?" for me, the reverend, and for others he knows to be church-people. John the Baptist wanted most of all to reach religious folks, wanted people like us to stop resisting God's judgment and sovereignty.

In the popular culture, Christmas arrives just after Halloween. The babe is lying peacefully in a plastic manger, and the songs of angel choirs are well amplified throughout the shopping complexes.

But none of that is our concern, these prophets insist, because God comes. God comes in the cries of the prophets of old and in street corner characters of our day, telling us that before the fullness of the kingdom of God can be made known, the rough places must be made plain, the way must be made clear and God's judgment must be endured. Only then will God's peace and God's justice fill the earth. Only then will the shepherd gather the flock. That will be the way that it's supposed to be.

Reflections on the lectionary

Sunday, December 11

John 1:6–8, 19–28

THESE ARE DAYS of harsh political rhetoric. Political factions insist not only on the goodness of their own ideas but also on the dramatic failure of their opponents' ideas. We might be in Advent, but this is no season for understanding or for mutual forbearance in our civil discourse.

The Christian church doesn't do much better than the rest of the culture. We would rather be divided than find the common space and faith that would unite us. Insistent as we are about the rectitude of our own ways, we hardly offer the world a model for reconciliation. Perhaps we are simply following the political models of our times—or perhaps we are finally getting what we thought we wanted: a culture in which the church is leading the way.

I teach and engage students who are preparing for ministry—some in the faith traditions in which they have been raised, some in traditions that are new to them, and some who insist that they belong to no tradition at all.

Almost all of these students are profoundly uninterested in denominational battles, in the self-justifying proclamations of divisive voices, each claiming to honor the church. Every day these students worship, sing and pray, eat and study together. They are certainly not of one mind—not about biblical scholarship, not about theology and not even about the practice of ministry. The lines of difference—philosophical, political and theological—are just as present within the walls of the divinity school as they are among the Christians in our churches. There is no reluctance to debate, to have at it about anything and everything. The students who are firmly embedded in dozens of different denominations celebrate their traditions with gusto. They are also quite willing to offer severe critiques of their own traditions.

But somehow even the deepest ideological disagreements fail to break relationships. Somehow there is an ongoing sense that the Christian faith that has moved them this far binds them together in their similarities and in their differences. It's much more interesting to them to understand why other faithful people disagree on the questions that face us, from same-gender marriage to the meaning of salvation, than it is to turn their backs on those people with whom they differ. After engaging in the kind of debate that would cause most seasoned clergy to head for the exit door, the students go outside and kick a soccer ball or make plans to continue their conversation over a couple of beers. I listen in as they dream about the

churches that they long to serve, the light of Jesus Christ that they hope to share. They seem to know that there are very different kinds of Christian communities awaiting their leadership. All of the possibilities seem full of promise—and somehow they know that the light of Jesus Christ promises to shine all the more brightly through those differences.

When did so many of us in the Christian church lose our clarity about God's ways of being known? How is it that we've become such a battleground that even those seeking election in partisan politics back away at the church's incivility and downright meanness?

John the Baptist was sent from God and came as a witness to testify to the light. He wasn't concerned about his own agenda, although clearly he knew what he believed to be right and what he believed to be wrong. John was more concerned with making sure that those who came his way would recognize that the light of God was coming into the world. When people wanted to sign on to his cause he turned them away. He was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

John the Baptist is most troubling to those who imagine that

Students seem to know that the light of Christ shines through their differences.

they alone are the rightful bearers of the light. That is why he offers such a compelling witness to divinity school students, and to the many faithful Christians in the world who understand that the struggles and disagreements of the present day, while legitimate expressions of varied faith perspectives, cannot define the inviting, illuminating light of Jesus Christ.

How are we treating those who find John's prophetic words to be compelling? Are we wearing them down, exhausting the visionary leaders who care more about the coming of light than about denominational and theological struggles? Institutional religion has successfully worn them down before.

John cries out in the wilderness of our church's confusion, testifying anew to the light. There is hope and promise in these Advent days, proclaims John. When we grow weary of the divisions, when we institution-keepers admit that we are no longer willing to enforce the lines in the sand that we have drawn, then we might be ready to see that light and to follow the directions of the guy in the hair shirt.

The author is Bill Goettler, assistant dean of ministerial studies at Yale Divinity School and co-pastor of First Presbyterian Church of New Haven.

New harmonies

by Steve Thorngate

HOW MANY KINDS of music are there? Most teenagers could come up with four or five. An aficionado might list dozens. But ask a church worship committee and you may hear that there are only two types, traditional and contemporary. Those terms don't tell you much. Which tradition, at what time? Contemporary to whom and where?

Decades after the first time an organ console was unplugged to make way for a guitar amp, the worship wars rage on. Nine years after Tom Long, in *Beyond the Worship Wars*, prescribed excellence across a range of musical styles, worship planners still find themselves talking about the relative merits of exactly two. There's either the densely theological hymn by Wesley or Luther (gobs of words sung over gobs of chords) or the vapid pop-rock song by some cool young person (maybe five words over three chords).

It's a stark difference, and it doesn't offer battleground churches a great set of options. A worship service should be cohesive, aesthetically pleasing and broadly inclusive. Worship that juxtaposes hymns with praise choruses is often a jarring, bipolar experience. And congregations that segregate by musical taste, creating separate services according to style, end up reducing diversity to an abstraction, reflected only on the membership roll.

Fortunately, these options are false ones. Church music is wonderfully diverse. Centuries of hymnody don't constitute a single style; neither, for that matter, do decades of praise choruses. And in which category would we put new classical hymns, old gospel hymns, black spirituals, Taizé chants or the folkie liturgical music borrowed from late-20th-century American Catholics? Then there's the minor matter of music from parts of the world that aren't dominated by white people. This wealth of music—and the fact that neither the organ people nor the praise-band people own it—offers rich possibilities for defusing the worship wars.

Obviously, many churches already draw from this variety, hymnal supplements in hand. And my depiction of the worship-warring factions is hyperbolic. Still, the organizing principle of traditional versus contemporary persists. Music that's hard to classify in either of those camps tends to get lumped together as a third, everything-in-between category. Reducing music to three categories is barely better than reducing it to two.

The way out of the worship wars, at least on the musical front, may be simply to think outside the two- or three-position

toggle switch. A number of good ideas on this subject have been floating around in recent years, such as the notion of church music that's simultaneously “ancient and future.” That's a helpful thought for framing the conversation, if not an altogether concrete one for getting the bulletins made.

More tangibly, some churches are creating cohesive, inclusive, excellent music in a way that goes far beyond the old dichotomy or trichotomy. At the risk of offering another reductive typology, I'd place such congregations and leaders into two

Some churches have moved far beyond the old worship war dichotomy.

rough categories: some revel in eclecticism, drawing from not one or two or three but many styles of music, with no clear favorite; others have developed a singular approach and sound that is so distinctive that it renders the terms *traditional* and *contemporary* irrelevant.

One congregation with a unique approach and sound is House of Mercy in St. Paul, Minnesota. A sense of lightly ironic whimsy infuses the worship at House of Mercy. The announcements are delivered by pastors Debbie Blue and Russell Rathbun in a sort of awkward duo comedy routine, and the children file out to a faux-pompous original march tune (“For ye are youngsters, true and free!”). The congregation, part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, isn't winking or insincere at its core. But it is filled with people—some young, some less so than when the church began in 1996—who are skeptical of conventional church. Churchy elements tend to be reimagined, slyly subverted, held half-smirkingly at arm's length.

The most prominent example is the music. Congregational singing is led by a country-gospel band with a mostly (though not slavishly) old-fashioned sound. The House of Mercy Band's repertoire includes the real gems of the Americana hymnbook; it also features some odder, less gracefully aged

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specimens (“You Can Talk to Jesus on the Royal Telephone”). Serious or silly, the songs are played with energy, aplomb and straight faces. That’s about it: there’s minimal liturgical service music, and the piano and organ rarely get used.

Rathbun, who cofounded House of Mercy with Blue and another pastor, remembers envisioning the music at House of Mercy as “a bit more eclectic” than it turned out to be. “Our liturgy is made up of elements from many traditions, and we saw the music reflecting that. But the country-gospel thing immediately seemed to work so well.”

It does work well. The songs are catchy and easy to sing. And the genre offers a distinctive and unified sound while lending itself to joyful high moments as well as tender low ones.

Most significantly, the old-time-gospel angle subverts the terms of the worship wars altogether. “It’s a tradition of sacred music that’s outside the experience of most of the people,” Rathbun observes of the country-gospel repertoire. “So there are not these battles over whether we play ‘our music’ or ‘their music.’”

The approach does, however, throw a bone to any closet worship warriors of either persuasion: the songs are old hymns, accompanied by guitars and drums. And this isn’t a new-fangled mashup, like those praise choruses that drag chestnut hymn texts through the modern-rock mire. On the contrary, a country band is more faithful to the origins of a lot of classic American hymnody than a church organ is.

House of Mercy’s close identification with country-gospel music has been a happy accident. Rathbun maintains that the church doesn’t conceive of music as an outreach tool, but over the years music has “attracted a lot more people than it turned away.” This happens through the band’s worship leadership, through concerts the church hosts and through a weekly guest artist slot in worship, in which guest musicians perform a song or two, sometimes departing from the House style, oftentimes not. The guest musician feature enables the church to support the local arts community (see “Artists in worship,” page 28), as well as to invite churchgoers to share their gifts while keeping the consistent sound of the band intact. “Occasionally people have expressed a desire to join the band,” notes Rathbun, “but not very often.”

A more significant issue is the repertoire’s limited thematic vocabulary. That isn’t always a problem. House of Mercy isn’t a letter-of-the-lectionary kind of place; it doesn’t need a theme song for every minor feast day. But when I visited shortly before Christmas, the only song that came off very well was the bluegrass standard “Beautiful Star of Bethlehem.” The band tried a few carols, but it proved hard for a country band to know what to do with a European carol’s stately style and constant chord changes. Rathbun is aware that “if people ever want a little traditional hymnody,” it’s at Christmas. “Sometimes we do [carols] a capella. It never really works that well.”

Rathbun points out, however, that high holiday hymns tend toward “power-and-glory types of messages”—whereas “we’re more of an up-from-the-bottom-but-still-stumbling kind of

For audio clips from some of the churches profiled here, go to christiancentury.org.



PHOTO COURTESY JAMES LUMSDEN / FIRST CHURCH OF CHRIST (PITTSFIELD, MA.)

church.” So he appreciates that so much country-gospel music “is about suffering and longing and hope.”

It’s also frequently about pie-in-the-sky escapism, holier-than-thou piety and blood-and-guts atonement. But House of Mercy has a high tolerance for contradiction—and a striking honesty about the imperfect theologies of faithful people.

A lot of these hymns “on some levels do run contrary to our theology,” admits Rathbun. “But we approach them with a sort

of second naïveté. We don’t shy away from their themes; we just put it out there.” Sometimes these themes push up against others in the service. “This can cause people to ask questions like,

‘What the hell’s going on here?’” says Rathbun. “Which is a high value for us at House of Mercy.”

Another high value of this congregation is great music. House of Mercy’s worship music is an example of doing one unique thing and doing it well.

That’s also the case at Grace Chicago, another young church filled with youngish adults. This Reformed Church in America congregation, started in 2002, planned its musical niche from the start. On a small budget, the church prioritized hiring a half-time musician with a distinct vision: clarinetist and composer James Falzone, who is immersed in Chicago’s vibrant scene of forward-thinking jazz and classical music.

“We tried to get beyond the worship wars,” explains Pastor Bob Reid, “by having a great musician do a lot that’s original and fresh.”

Falzone draws from a wide swath of Christian tradition, shaping the source material to his sensibilities. He reharmonizes (or simply rewrites) melodies, reconfigures song forms and adds or omits bridges. “Hymns were traditionally a liquid

thing,” Falzone points out. “Only recently do we have this idea that this text has to be sung with this melody.” But his approach is “not about making the music more complex. It’s about making it more appropriate for the ensemble.”

The Grace Consort has what might be called a chamber folk sound, with strong jazz and contemporary classical elements. Falzone plays wind instruments and keyboards and is joined by a vocalist, percussionist and guitarist—all paid professionals. (Having professional caliber musicians was another priority from the start.) Seated center stage, the group plays during much of the service, offering interludes and backdrops—Falzone compares this music to a film score—along with leading the singing. It’s all very polished and effective, presenting an uncommonly cohesive worship experience defined largely by its distinctive music.

“We care about aesthetics,” stresses Reid. “We believe that whatever we’re doing we should do as well as we possibly can.”

“If Jesus wasn’t a physical being,” adds Falzone, “then form and sound and taste and sight wouldn’t matter as much for worship; we could just meditate or something. The incarnation suggests that God cares deeply about beauty.”

This aesthetic focus has tended to come with a parallel emphasis on particularity: Falzone doesn’t ape various styles in a scattershot appeal to people’s tastes. Instead, Grace’s music is defined by his specific affinities, creatively adapted to a church context.

One impressive innovation is Falzone’s use of a shambling kind of improvisation as background to confession. “It feels broken,” he says of the music. The seasoned performer has had a harder time, however, with unintentional imperfection: when a postlude fell apart, he “wanted to run out of the room.”

Others present may have appreciated the humanizing moment. Though Grace’s music is impressive, some churchgoers have found it inaccessible. The leaders are aware of the issue. “We’ve listened to our people and tried to discern why it’s been difficult for some of them to worship,” says Reid.

One lesson is the value of the simple and familiar: “We have come to appreciate the need for more comfort food. It’s like

preaching: having preached on a text 18 times, there’s the danger of bringing the thing that’s most interesting to you. But it’s not always what people need to hear.”

Falzone has responded by using more spirituals and drawing from other emotionally immediate traditions; he’s also been trying to allude subtly to familiar styles. Recently the ensemble even played a U2 song—though not a straight cover but a subdued version with organ, acoustic guitar and African talking drum. While it might not have been the highlight of the musicians’ morning, Reid recalls that “people were exuberant.”

Instrumental timbres make a difference, too. Falzone was struck when an arrangement that got a lackluster response one

**“Music,” says one pastor,
“is our greatest opportunity
to cultivate hospitality.”**

week earned compliments after he added a simple tambourine. And he’s grown attentive to individual instruments’ popular connotations: while a cello might register as aloof, “a Rhodes [electric] piano feels a lot more at home for our people.”

Playing more piano and less clarinet is one way that Falzone is trying to separate his work at Grace from his performing career. When he plays the clarinet—“an extension of my body”—he’s “always trying to express something.” Falzone and the ensemble have been working to make sure Sunday morning isn’t too much like Saturday night at the avant-garde jazz club.

It’s easy, offers Reid, to “slip into what feels like a performance of great music. But it has to be fundamentally about what ministers to people deeply. The church’s love of excellence, he says, can also create a problem: aestheticism can exclude people. And not only in worship: “People will say, ‘I don’t want to bring a dish to the potluck, because I’m not a foodie and it won’t be good enough.’”

This tension between accessibility and aesthetic value looms large at Grace also because of the several musicians (of varying abilities) sitting among the young urbanites in the pews. Grace remains committed to the fixed ensemble approach, but Falzone has been experimenting with ways of getting people involved. Churchgoers have played as substitutes; Falzone’s pushing himself to use them also to augment the ensemble from time to time. He’s collaborating with a songwriter from the congregation on an original hymn—something he hopes to try with others. And he’s doing more a capella songs.

Grace is also creating a choir, no audition required. That’s a day in the life of many small churches, where inclusiveness often trumps aesthetic standards. At Grace, the move is an intentional corrective to the opposite tendency.

The Gospel of Mark

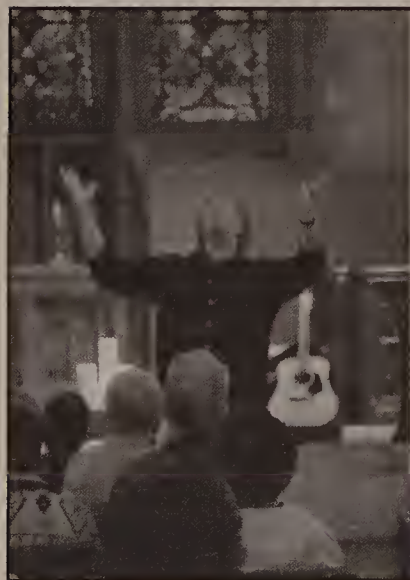
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Bert Marshall is New England Regional Director for Church World Service and a graduate of Yale Divinity School



"There's no precedent at Grace," says Falzone, which has allowed him and Reid to cultivate something fresh and particular. "It's a great thing," he maintains. "But it's also led to some mistakes."

House of Mercy and Grace Chicago have each made a distinctive, unified sound a significant part of their identities. But both are start-up churches that fashioned their identity more or less from scratch. What about churches that are not young, weren't begun by their current leaders and have had a conventional music program? For such churches, eclecticism is often the key to worship peace.

When James Lumsden arrived at First Church of Christ in 2007, the small UCC congregation in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, exemplified, in Lumsden's words, "hypertraditional 1950s Reformed worship." He shook things up on his first Sunday by including a song by Scottish singer-songwriter Yvonne Lyon. "I haven't looked back once," he said. But he did move carefully.

Lumsden got existing leaders to commit to worship experimentation, and he stressed a both-and approach: "We added, rather than taking away." That way, "people who like traditional music do not feel that they have 'lost' anything." He met some resistance—"there was concern that sometimes I was pushing too fast"—but not a lot.

Of the four churches profiled here, First Church comes closest to a conventional "blended" approach. The church now has two regular ensembles: a choir and a rock band. But the music goes beyond the standard dualism of a hymn here and a chorus there. The choir sings classical anthems frequently but not exclusively; in the summer it serves as the core of a larger gospel choir that also sings global music. And the band, Between the Banks, doesn't play much of the praise music you might expect.

Instead, the group focuses on what Lumsden calls "secular spiritual music" from the pop world. "New music needs to have a connection to people's real lives," he explains. Whereas Grace Chicago's ensemble has dabbled with U2 somewhat reluctantly, Between the Banks plays that group's music enthusiastically, along with music by Bruce Springsteen, Green Day and others. A guitarist and singer, Lumsden leads the band himself, with energy and skill.

Hearing familiar pop music at church can be a little off-putting. The songs often seem out of place, their spiritual themes rendered thin in the light of Christian worship. But Lumsden, who wrote his doctoral dissertation on the spirituality of rock music,

argues that this music "connects real life with the spiritual journey." If you want worship to speak to spiritual seekers—unchurched or otherwise—that's a point worth considering. Collective Soul's 1993 hit "Shine" is no jewel of songcraft, but it is well known—and the church may be just the place to engage its questioning lyrics ("Show me where to look / Tell me, will love be there?").

The Between the Banks version of "Shine" is, like most of the band's repertoire, largely acoustic. Besides steering around the arena-rock showiness that praise bands can fall into, this approach contributes to the fairly seamless way that First Church mixes styles. The band prefaces "Shine" with "The Lone, Wild Bird," accompanied by solo recorder—a sparse treatment that highlights the antebellum hymn's folk roots, creating a natural prelude to a stripped-down rock song. And the hymn's text—"I am yours! I rest in you"—offers Christian solace in response to the longing of "Shine." The two disparate songs are truly blended, not just thrown into a room to take turns in pleasing some of the people some of the time.

This kind of creative worship planning lends cohesion to what could be a jarring experience. So does the fact that both the choir and the band have a strong eclectic streak, pulling out material from all over the stylistic (and literal) map to create an effect that's more collage than dualistic. Lumsden considers variety a basic issue of hospitality. Even at a small, mostly

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MARK R. GORNIK

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white church in the Berkshires, “on any given Sunday there are four or five musical cultures present. If you want to do inter-generational worship well—and I do—you have to appeal to head and heart, to tradition and innovation. And all of it has to be done with integrity and skill”—especially considering “the high standards people are accustomed to all week long.”

That last point is crucial. High-church partisans sometimes talk about worship as an aesthetic refuge from the shallow entertainments of the rabble. But as soon as you allow that aesthetic standards are relevant in high- and low-art contexts alike, it’s clear that the ubiquity of media-connected gadgets makes it at least possible for people to be immersed in excellence like never before. “You can’t fake it with music,” says Lumsden. “It has to be good, and it has to connect with real life.”

And as Lumsden points out, while music “is not the only art form in worship that can either welcome or exclude, it is the one we have the greatest control over”—certainly more than a worship space’s physical appearance and function. “Music is our greatest opportunity to cultivate hospitality,” he insists. “Will we embrace the best of the contemporary as well as of the past? Can we carefully blend styles so that the heart is engaged as much as the head?”

First Church pulls this off, creating an eclectically blended service that holds together while reflecting the belief that “diversity of good music matters,” as Lumsden puts it. “Beauty

allows us to see what is real,” he says, “and it needs everyone’s perspective to go deeper.”

United Church of Rogers Park on Chicago’s far north side has a fine pianist in music director Mark Bowman. But he didn’t play much piano on the Sunday I visited. He did sing several brief solos to introduce songs, even though—as he acknowledged later—he has “a little trouble staying on pitch.”

At this small United Methodist congregation, excellent performance is not the main concern. Yet the church’s music is, in its way, quite beautiful. A lot of that has to do with Bowman’s leadership.

Issues of quality and inclusion can’t be separated.

When Bowman arrived at the church in 2001, he needed some prodding to get out from behind the piano. “Standing out in front of people and singing—with my voice exposed—was scary,” he recalls. He tried it, however, and today songleading is at the core of his ministry.

When Bowman leads a song, the congregation follows him readily and ably. Typically he splits the room up by location rather than vocal range. Assisted by other leaders he’s trained,

Bowman teaches music by rote and quickly produces rich, full part-singing—made all the fuller by the octave doublings of low and high voices. “If you hear something across the room that you like better,” he tells the people, “sing that.”

Bowman often hears from peers about congregations that “won’t learn new music.” But he thinks the real issue is that people “haven’t been enabled to.” Effective songleading doesn’t always come naturally, so Bowman has developed seminars for area churches. “You can’t just say, ‘Listen to the organist play this hymn, and we’re going to sing,’” he argues. “That’s difficult even for me. You have to match your voice to another voice; that’s how you learn to sing.”

Before Bowman, United Church was an organ-and-choir church. It still has a choir that sings every week, which has “been integral to what we’ve done,” Bowman says. “Part of my work is to help [choir members] see their role as worship leaders” and not performers.

As for the organ, “I just use it when a hymn calls for it”—which isn’t that often. While the grand old hymns are central to Bowman’s background, these days he includes only one or two a month.

Instead, he programs a lot of music


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that is easy to learn and sing. This includes a wide assortment of newer liturgical music from the U.S. and the UK, and especially from elsewhere on the globe. He goes well beyond the non-Western material in most denominational hymnals, offering a steady and varied stream of new expressions. East Rogers Park is one of the most diverse neighborhoods in the U.S., and United Church has long reflected the neighborhood it serves. In a couple of minutes, Bowman gets all these very different people chiming in on a song few of them have heard before.

When approaching global music, Bowman tries to “put a little of the original cultural context there”—a percussion pattern here, a vocal technique there—“so people get a little feel.” But he’s no purist; he readily adapts music to Western voices and available instruments. He’s also careful not to ask too much of people. African harmony is easy for American singers; African body movement, not so much. “And to do some intricate clapping rhythm?” He laughs. “No way.”

Early on, Bowman thinks, he sometimes overdid it with the new music. “Folks started saying, ‘We enjoy learning new music, but maybe we should go back and sing more of the music we’ve learned.’” He realized that his task is not just keeping things fresh; it’s “helping people build a new repertoire at the base of their faith. It becomes their music”—a theological core for a shared life of faith.

United churchgoers also own the music through instrumen-

tal participation. For Bowman, including people in worship is a theological imperative. When he learns of an instrumentalist in the congregation, he simply says, “I’d love to have you play with us. Are you comfortable and ready to do that?” The Sunday I visited, someone distributed some percussion instruments indiscriminately, without objection from Bowman. This level of inclusiveness might lead to chaos at many churches. But at United I witnessed the well-trained songleaders holding things together, and the joy was palpable. “A significant goal of worship,” maintains Bowman, “is to get people involved in ministry.”

He’s especially interested in getting the congregation to sing. That’s “what worship is all about,” he insists, and it’s a practice that excludes no one. With singing at the fore, genre matters less. Bowman laments that “people get hung up on the worship wars—‘we do the traditional music; we do the praise music.’ That’s not the issue. All forms of music have a legitimate place in worship, but neither a blaring organ nor a blaring praise band is conducive to leading singing.”

Cohesive programming matters; so does the overall quality of material and execution. But in church music of any style, the values of excellence and inclusion ultimately can’t be separated, because whatever one’s aesthetic standards, the musical form itself is a participatory one.

“The question,” says Bowman, “is this: How do you get the congregation to lift its voice in praise?”

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Artists in worship

by Jesse James DeConto

OF THE 60 PEOPLE who gathered for the Good Friday service at House of Mercy Church in St. Paul, 14 had fashioned artistic symbols of Christ's body to serve as stations of the cross. Found-object artist Maria Bianchi had turned an old wicker laundry basket into a human torso by weaving willow branches and satin ribbons through the basket and then stamping it with Jesus' words, "Do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children."

At the 14th station, Bianchi and the other artists laid their art pieces on Sonja Olson's handcrafted pall on a communion table. There was a pile of sculptures of human limbs or wooden boxes depicting a head or a rib cage.

"We think of each other as parts of the Body," Bianchi said. "This was really moving."

Bianchi, who manages an art gallery, creates art for House of Mercy two or three times a year. "It really stretches my creative power. It's integral to the worship experience for me."

One of the worshipers was Joshua Melvin, 22, who moved from station to station in his wheelchair. "It was very humbling to follow Christ in his footsteps, to see what he saw, to suffer what he suffered, to feel what he felt. I had never done anything like this before," he said.

In 1996, Mark Stenberg and Russell Rathbun teamed up with Debbie Blue to start House of Mercy as an American Baptist mission church. Rathbun had trained in theater at Bethel College and Seattle Pacific University, and Blue's husband is a painter. All three of the pastors quickly became immersed in the Twin Cities arts scene.

"When our friends have an art opening or their band is opening somewhere," said Rathbun, "they send postcards. So we sent postcards to all our friends and said, 'Hey, we're starting a church on Sunday.' Friends who never really went to church before came to help us out." They found that artists were craving a way to express their own spiritual experiences through original art and in-depth dialogue.

Using original art for the stations of the cross began at House of Mercy's first Good Friday celebration. The church has also been distinct in its musical style, featuring traditional country gospel music and songs by artists like Hank Williams and Johnny Cash. (Before he died, Cash gave the church rights to use his songs in its hymnal.) The church has published its own hymnbook; many of the songs are played on Radio Mercy through the church's website. House of Mercy Records has produced 26 original albums. The church sponsors concerts at the Turf Club

music bar in St. Paul, and local bands and songwriters perform at most of the regular Sunday night worship services.

Minnesota musician John Hermanson started attending House of Mercy because of its old-time gospel music. He had attended conservative evangelical churches that were trying out 20th-century musical forms, and he found that many of the musicians who played in that style were uncomfortable with the theological narrowness of the lyrics.

"These musicians didn't want people to know that they're playing in church," he said.

House of Mercy has bridged the gap between the church and the arts scene by inviting musicians to perform their songs at Sunday night services, where there's "no fear of being known as a church musician." On Sunday evenings, Hermanson said, "there's this creativity and unexpected sort of thing: each Sunday you don't know who's going to be there."

Paul Erickson, who directs evangelical mission for the St. Paul Area Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, noted that music, paintings and poetry offer people an open-ended way to engage with the gospel without having to accept a particular interpretation. Art "can mean something different for everyone," he said, and that's the approach House of Mercy takes to faith as well.

"People who are attracted to House of Mercy really have the BS detector keenly tuned. It's about as far from simple answers to life's honest questions as you can get."

By 2006, Stenberg decided to try transplanting this artist-centered approach into the liturgy of Lutheran worship. He joined with Kae Evensen, an ELCA pastor, to start Mercy Seat Lutheran Church with the help of a \$250,000 start-up budget from the ELCA's Minneapolis synod.

Unlike House of Mercy, Mercy Seat's worship is rooted in the Lutheran tradition. Familiar texts like the Kyrie Eleison and the Sanctus are given new melodies.

"The book readers, the artists are leaving the church," Evensen said. "There's not a place for them." She pointed out that in the past the church often served as a patron of the arts, but today a reliance on technology rather than original creativity has left congregations using projector screens and showing uninspired clip art.

"Let's give the people the stories and [let them] just give

Jesse James DeConto is a writer and musician in Durham, North Carolina.

back through art, music, filmmaking or whatever, and let people figure out what it is for themselves,” Evensen said.

“Christian art is sometimes just praying hands, or Jesus carrying sheep over his shoulder or . . . an American flag or an eagle soaring. It’s illustration, it’s not art,” she said. “In some churches I served, people . . . just didn’t think about art.

“You go to the Minneapolis Institute of Art—and then you come to church and a puppet show will do?” she queried. People know that there is more to faith, she said, “it’s just that they don’t have any vocabulary, don’t know how to articulate it.”

Evensen thinks the decline of ecclesial art goes hand in hand with an overall dumbing down of Christian teaching. “My friends didn’t go to church because they just couldn’t handle a lot of platitudes from the sermon. They’d read Nietzsche in college, and then they come to church and get puppy stories,” she said.

On Easter Sunday, Mercy Seat music coordinator Wes Burdine led his Mass for the End of the World, a Beach Boys-meet-Neil

Art offers an open-ended way to engage the gospel.

Young setting of the Lutheran liturgy. Unlike the acoustic pop of Nashville-inspired contemporary Christian music, Burdine’s mass is a kind of mellow pop of layered guitars and chantlike vocal harmonies that presents the apocalypse with reverence and peace. Burdine’s is one of about a dozen musical liturgies that Mercy Seat has commissioned over the past five years, in styles ranging from jazz, alt-country and folk to punk, rock and 1950s doo-wop.

“It’s about not being afraid to expand on what liturgy means, but it’s not about throwing the liturgy out,” explained Hermanson, who leads worship at Oak Knoll Lutheran Church in Minnetonka but worships at House of Mercy and has composed a liturgy for Mercy Seat. “Often when you have a guitar in church,” he said, it is used for “praise music or very contemporary stuff as opposed to remaining within the tradition.”

Mercy Seat pays liturgy composers \$250 and band members \$50 each when they perform. Including costs for promoting visual art shows, a sound technician and Burdine’s monthly stipend, Mercy Seat spends about \$27,000 a year on the arts—a quarter of its annual budget. (The ELCA’s Minneapolis synod contributes about \$25,000 a year to the church.) At those rates, the church is one of the better-paying gigs in the area.

“It’s nice to bring [musicians] in and say, ‘You know, what you’re doing is really great and worthwhile,’” Burdine said. “Since the rest of the world won’t recognize that by paying you well, we want you to know that creating something is valuable.”

Scott Munson, 32, left a career in civil engineering to pursue songwriting. Mercy Seat paid him for a liturgy before he’d ever performed in public. With two of his masses in the worship rotation, the church is one of his key employers. His work at Mercy Seat has led to scoring music for a documentary film and a commercial.

“When someone’s willing to pay you actual money and use what you do for their service, it means the world to you,” Munson said. “That to an artist is a tremendously dignifying and meaningful thing in the day-to-day calculations of life.”



COURTESY JON REISCHL

ART FOR WORSHIP: This artwork, created by John Reischl, was part of the stations of the cross exhibit at House of Mercy, which fosters close ties with the arts community.

Mercy Seat’s liturgies have gotten attention far beyond the Twin Cities. Keith Anderson, a Lutheran pastor in Woburn, Massachusetts, asked Burdine to provide sheet music for a few songs that his church could incorporate into its worship. Anderson learned about Mercy Seat through Facebook.

“What I see in Mercy Seat is this really great attempt to do the Lutheran liturgy with integrity but in a way that uses the music and language of this time, this moment.”

Anderson compares the Mercy Seat approach to technological “hacking”—manipulating a piece of existing software so that it serves new purposes. He draws other ideas from emergent churches around the country.

Kevin Aikens, pastor of a newly organized Baptist church in Hamilton, Ontario, said that Hermanson’s settings of traditional Lutheran texts are better at helping non-Christians relate to the church’s theological claims than is the emotionalism expressed by a lot of contemporary worship music. “They’ve added a sound that’s familiar to a song that’s familiar—the old, beautiful, ancient songs sound like they could be on a new [indie rock] album.”

The ELCA has been open to liturgical experiments, like those under way at Sanctuary, an emergent church that recently opened in Marshfield, Massachusetts, and at the House for All Sinners and Saints in Denver. The ELCA’s St. Paul and Minneapolis synods have supported House of Mercy and Mercy Seat, though they’re barely recognizable as Lutheran on the surface. The ELCA has also supported Humble Walk Lutheran Church, a church plant in St. Paul’s West End where

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much of the worship music comes from songwriters in the congregation. Humble Walk has invited Hermanson to lead its tiny congregation in his liturgy, "Is This the Feast of Victory?"

Humble Walk Pastor Jodi Houge said of her church: "Selfishly, I wanted a place for my friends. They often feel so lonely walking into a normal congregation because nobody looks or acts like them."

"It's not that we set out to be artistic, but art is such a vital part of the community that's already gathered. Through the arts," she said, "we get these glimpses of heartbreak and loss and grief and beauty that we maybe wouldn't normally get in church."

Mercy Seat is planning to publish a hymnal, and it hopes to commission a mass from a big-name artist like Sufjan Stevens, Dolly Parton or Neko Case. Stenberg is hoping that such a work will draw attention to Mercy Seat's liturgical innovation and help the tiny church to grow, much as House of Mercy has done by hosting concerts featuring Ralph Stanley, Charlie Louvin and Gordon Gano of the Violent Femmes.

Erickson believes that other churches can learn how to incorporate the arts to attract younger generations. For Evensen, however, the new liturgies aren't meant to attract new members so much as to affirm local artists. "I never wanted to grow the church," she said. "I wanted to honor people's intelligence and gifts and real lives."

Over at Humble Walk, the congregation of 50 has already outgrown its storefront space. Houge said it can't grow any bigger and still maintain the close-knit relationships that help it to

affirm individual gifts—like those of the artists who have been attracted there.

House of Mercy has grown almost by accident, perhaps because its old-time country sound resonates with the Twin Cities alt-country music scene. If there's a formula, Rathbun said, it's not in featuring good art but in responding to the culture of the local community. "I would never say, 'Oh, here's what you've got to do, you've got to have an arts church.' It's a niche market."


Their methods might not work everywhere, but in the Twin Cities artist communities, these congregations are filling a need.

On Good Friday at House of Mercy, as he got in the line to make the stations of the cross, Joshua Melvin thought of the dozen surgeries he's had on his legs. "I've learned to walk over and over again," he said later. "I've had to be crucified with Christ over and over again."

One by one, the worshipers cupped soil in their hands and sprinkled it over the representation of Jesus' body and laid carnations on the symbolic tomb. Rathbun and Blue then covered the body with black linen, just as they did the wine and bread resting on the altar. Two days later, the grave clothes and the dirt came off, and Christ rose again.

Rathbun observed that acting out Jesus' death, burial and resurrection communicated the gospel in a way his words never could. Melvin said, "I could touch Christ in a deeper way by seeing that spectacle. It was one of the most incredible things I've ever experienced."

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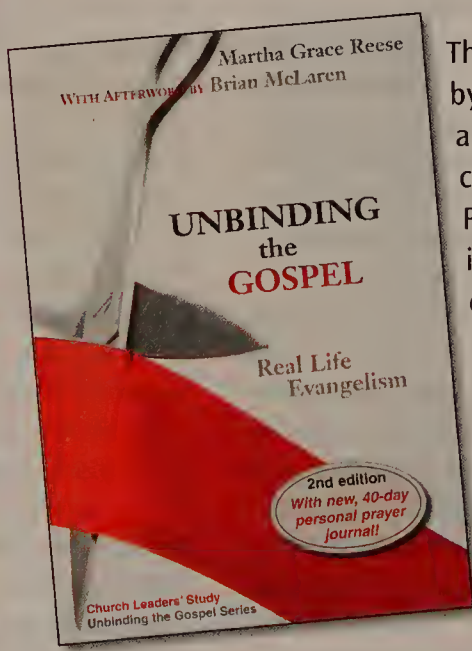
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Nobel winner Leymah Gbowee

To tell the truth

by Amy Frykholm

IN THE SUMMER of 1990, two decades before she would win the Nobel Peace Prize, Leymah Gbowee was a frightened 18-year-old huddled in the courtyard of her church in Liberia, expecting the worst. In the midst of civil war between the government and rebel forces led by Charles Taylor, Gbowee's family had left their home and taken refuge in St. Peter's Lutheran Church in Monrovia. Within weeks, close to 1,000 refugees were living in St. Peter's compound.

On July 29, government forces attacked the church in search of food. After raping and killing the woman who held the keys to the church, they proceeded to kill more than 500 men, women and children inside the church using machetes, knives and machine guns. Gbowee and her family had managed to escape just the day before. One of her uncles had come to the church and told the soldiers holding the refugees hostage that he needed to collect his family. Asked which tribe he belonged to, he had lied and named the tribe to which the soldiers belonged, speaking a few words of their language. They released Gbowee, her mother and other relatives, warning them not to come back.

Gbowee was born on the outskirts of Monrovia, a place called Old Road. Her neighborhood was a patchwork of simple homes and kitchen gardens belonging to closely linked families. She thinks of it as a privileged background because her family always had enough to eat and had aspirations for their children's education and future. A member of the Kpelle tribe, she was one of Liberia's indigenous people, not one of the Americo-Liberians, the descendants of the freed American slaves who settled in Liberia in the 19th century and became the country's ruling elite.

The Kpelle people became Lutheran Christians during the latter part of the 19th century through the work of missionaries David and Emily Day. (Hospitals and schools in Liberia still carry the Day name.) Religious distinctions were not highly significant, however. Her grandmother's best friend was a Muslim, and people of many different Christian denominations lived together. Growing up on Old Road, she says, "We knew who went to the church and who went to the mosque, and that was it. We didn't ask people their denomination."

Gbowee's family was active at St. Peter's, the largest Lutheran church in Liberia, which also houses the offices for the Lutheran Church in Liberia, the national Lutheran women's organization and the Trauma Healing and Reconciliation Program (THRP), among other ministries. Her

mother served as an usher and was on the women's committee. Gbowee attended vacation Bible school and served as an acolyte from the age of ten. In her memoir *Mighty Be Our Powers*, Gbowee writes that she loved the church's "high, wood-covered ceiling, the arched windows of pale blue and red colored glass."

But the massacre at St. Peter's and the horrors of war turned Gbowee from an ambitious teenager with plans for medical school into a traumatized refugee. For almost ten years Gbowee moved back and forth between Sierra Leone, Ghana and Liberia. Her faith in God and in most everything else eroded. She entered into a relationship with an abusive man, gave birth

Weekly prayer gatherings turned into a mass movement.

to four children in quick succession and then, depressed and desperate, moved in with her parents in Monrovia. She found a job at St. Peter's as a social worker with THRP, dealing with women and with child soldiers who were psychologically and physically devastated by the civil war.

Although Gbowee had moved back home and back into her church community, her feelings about St. Peter's were complicated. She was reluctant to let the people of the church see what a mess her life had become. In some ways, she thought of St. Peter's as her parents' place, not her own. She was also weighed down by the memory of the violence at the church and the church's helplessness in the face of it. And she had little respect for the church's leaders, whom she saw as degrading women and seeking power.

But she felt useful in her work at THRP. Her boss, a Lutheran pastor known as BB Colley, noticed her intelligence, sense of humor and passionate speech and not only gave her more and more responsibilities but also encouraged her to read works by Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., the Kenyan peace activist Hizkias Assefa and John Howard Yoder. He challenged her to think for herself. "If you are going into the field," he told her, "you need to be armed with ideas." She was struck especially by Gandhi's claim that violence and tyranny never finally succeed. "In the end, they always fail. Think of it:

always,” Gandhi wrote. In her memoir, Gbowee writes that she began, slowly, to see the truth of this.

Through her work with THRP she began learning about peace building and started developing her own techniques. One of these is “shedding the weight”: women sit in circles and tell of the rapes, murders and horrors they have experienced and seen, and they talk about the suffering of their children. They speak about the costs of being a woman in Africa.

“I call us the sponges of our society,” Gbowee explains. “Regardless of where you function as a woman . . . you take in everything from everyone. And then you are not allowed to let it out. You are supposed to be strong and not say anything. We realized that all of these women needed a place to let it out.”

Truth-telling at any cost is a cornerstone of Gbowee’s leadership style. That commitment is evident in her memoir and in her speeches. Her writing records her heavy drinking, her less-than-ideal relationships with men and her failures as a mother. “People say, ‘Do you regret having your personal story out there?’ I say no. No. This is just the first part of my story.”

For comparison, imagine Martin Luther King Jr., in the midst of the civil rights struggle in the U.S., writing a book exposing his personal failings. It would likely have been seen as undermining his status and his cause. But Gbowee does not want anyone to think of her as a hero. Her writing intentionally and to great effect exposes her failures in leadership, her regrets at watching her children grow up without her, and the bickering that marred the movement she helped lead. She believes that this helps the movement because it allows others to speak the truth of their own lives and so become freer.

She is just as honest when speaking to representatives of the United Nations or the European Union, or with Lutheran bishops. Invited by French President Nicholas Sarkozy to address an EU/UNIFEM conference on peacekeeping missions in Africa, she reports telling participants, “Don’t think when you are going to Africa that you have all the knowledge, because you don’t know a thing. . . . Are you going to emphasize the issue of protecting of women? It is not enough to have 10,000 troops on the ground when the rapes of women are still increasing, the deaths of women are still increasing. Then please don’t come.” A Nigerian friend once said to her, “I don’t understand how you come to these meetings, abuse these people, and they will still call you back the next year.”

They call her back, Gbowee believes, because they want to hear the truth. She is relentlessly critical of institutions of power and relishes the role of outsider and iconoclast. She has even been sharply critical of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who became Liberia’s president in 2005 and who shares the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize with Gbowee and Yemeni activist Tawakkul Karman.

In late 1999, the civil war in Liberia entered another phase. Onetime rebel Charles Taylor, now president, was under attack from rebel groups in the north of the country. Long-standing tensions between Americo-Liberians and indigenous Liberians, as well as tensions between Christians and Muslims and between rural and urban Liberians, created the context for violence and instability. Gbowee continued to work for THRP but also helped start the Women In Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET).

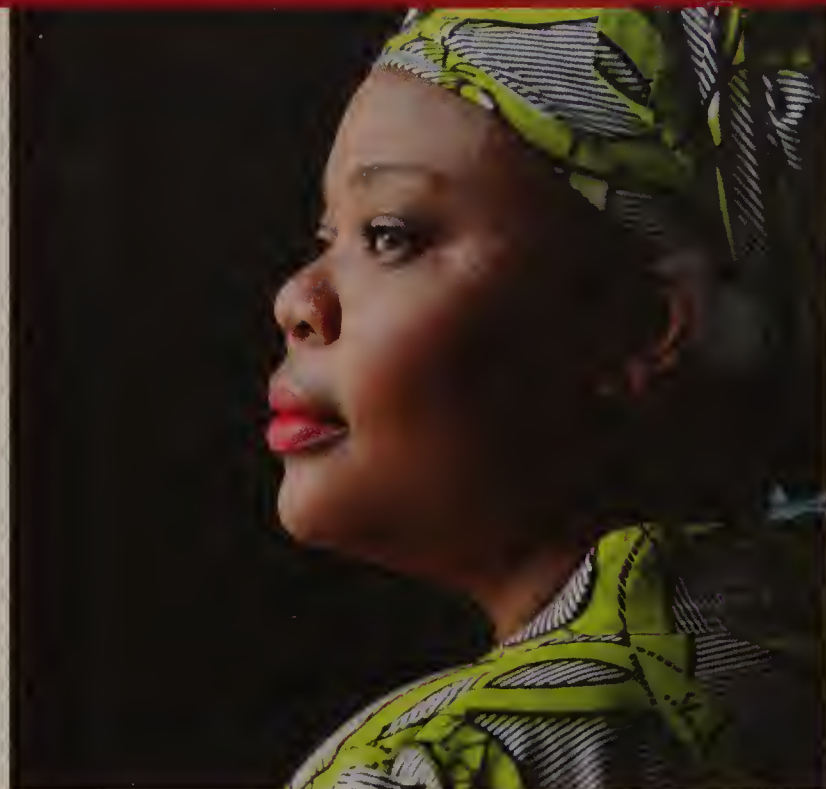


PHOTO BY MICHAEL ANGELO FOR WONDERLAND

Working with a broader coalition of African women, she crafted a curriculum aimed at helping women tell the stories of war so as to help heal themselves and their societies. As the fighting intensified, Gbowee arranged for her children to go to Ghana with her sister while she stayed in Liberia. Lonely, fearful, frustrated, she frequently found herself sleeping in the WIPNET offices.

In the spring of 2002, while spending the night there, she had a dream: in the dark a voice commanded her, “Gather the women to pray for peace.” Gbowee was baffled by this instruction. She didn’t see herself as a religious leader. She was a single mother, never married, who had a complicated relationship with her church. “It was like hearing the voice of God, yes, but . . . that wasn’t possible,” she writes in her memoir. “I drank too much. I fornicated! I was sleeping with a man who wasn’t my husband, who in fact was still legally married to someone else. If God was going to speak to someone in Liberia, it wouldn’t be me.”

Later that day, she tentatively shared the dream with a co-worker at St. Peter’s compound where the offices of THRP were located. A few women overheard the conversation, and one responded, “We need to pray.”

Twenty women started to pray once a week. This was the beginning of what came to be called the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace. Eventually it comprised thousands of women, including Muslims and Christians, educated and non-educated, rural and urban.

Gbowee described the movement at a recent gathering of Women of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. “We started a peace outreach project, going to the churches on Sunday, the market stalls on Saturday, the mosques on Friday. The not so usual suspects of peace building were the ones that we were mobilizing and recruiting. In nine months, we grew from 20 to over 1,000. We had to set up teams to engage the different communities. We brought them together to talk about some of the issues that I see so prominent in this nation and in other nations—the issue of the divide within races, the issue of the divide based on religious affiliation. We have to bring women together because we never really thought that our

agency was in ourselves. We recognized that if we must continue on the right path, we must tear down the veils of Christian versus Muslim, Kpelle versus Loma, elite versus urban—all of those things we needed to tear down.”

The Mass Action for Peace movement spread quickly throughout Liberia. Linda Post Bushkofsky, the executive director of Women of the ELCA, the first U.S. organization to note Gbowee’s work, said that in remote areas of Liberia one can still see WIPNET signs that women used to signal a gathering place for their protests. The mass action was, in essence, a street protest. After a time of prayer, the women would stand on the side of the street, wearing white, holding signs demanding peace. They ignored threats from Taylor’s government that any protesters would be beaten and instead increased their visibility and sent him invitations to meet their demands.

The women did little more than make their shared suffering visible. These “fish market women,” as some called them, were acting so far outside cultural norms that they weren’t recognized as a political force. A few years later, when Abigail Disney was searching for footage of those early protests to include in her

Gbowee ponders whether to run for parliament or to remain an activist outsider.

film on Gbowee, she found almost nothing. Gbowee writes that the response from local photographers to the request was, “Why would we [have filmed them]? They just looked pathetic.”

Every day the women protested, and every night a small group gathered to make plans for the next day. The work was intense and rife with internal conflicts among the women. “Later, I learned that it is called ‘strategic peace building,’ but that’s not what we called it,” Gbowee told me. “Every night we sat down together and said, ‘Let’s ask: What did we do good? What did we do bad? How can we improve?’ Those three questions guided our work.”

Recalling her conflicted role as leader of this movement, Gbowee says: “I tell people that I resigned over 1,000 times

before we even signed the peace agreement. I would go to a meeting and I would say, ‘I resign today. I am no longer your leader. I resign tomorrow. I don’t want to be a part of this group.’ Sometimes I walked out of the meeting, and by the time I got to my house they would come knocking on my door. They would say, ‘We will continue the meeting at your house. You can never give up on us.’”

The women kept their message simple: “We want peace. No more war.” They sat through rain, wind and blistering heat. They sat while they argued, discussed and strategized, through disagreements both petty and substantial. When they gathered early in the morning, they began with Christian and Muslim prayers. They developed a repertoire of songs; they listened to one another’s stories. Very rarely did they sense that their protest was making a difference. The civil war went on, displacing thousands of Liberians from their homes.

When Taylor finally agreed to hear the women’s demands, they chose Gbowee as their spokeswoman and asked her to read a statement that they had all agreed on. But Gbowee decided that the statement was too polite. Once she had a microphone in her hand, she used it. After reading the group’s statement she continued on her own, to the chagrin of some of the network’s other leaders. “We are tired of war,” she said. “We are tired of running. We are tired of begging for bulgur wheat. We are tired of our children being raped.”

As the women’s movement gained coverage from BBC’s *Focus on Africa* and eventually CNN and other international news media, pressure mounted on Taylor to enter into peace talks with the rebels. He agreed reluctantly to meet with rebel leaders in Accra, the capital of Ghana. Gbowee and others decided to camp outside the hotel where the talks were taking place.

Meanwhile, reports from Monrovia painted a dire picture. The rebels were gaining on the city, and the president’s forces were fighting back. Every public hospital had been ransacked, every school looted and closed. Taylor had said, “We will fight street to street, house to house.” A bloodbath was on the horizon. The women felt helpless and foolish, camped outside the hotel in Accra waiting for a peace agreement that would never come, while warlords lounged by the pool and communicated with their combatants in Monrovia about battle plans.

Gbowee said that the darkest times were when she would look for signs that their work was succeeding and find none. “When I took my eyes off my community and started to track successes in the eyes of the world—for example, I would look and see that they were still shooting—I was losing it. But when I came back to that group, to their faith in that higher power, even in the midst of chaos, they still believed in what they do, then my energy came back.”

One day after the negotiators went into a conference room, the women

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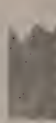
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moved into the hallway and blocked the door. They passed a note through the glass doors. No one could come out, the women said, until a ceasefire agreement was signed. This was perhaps the culminating moment of all that Gbowee had learned as a peace builder. There is a time for strategizing, alliance building and networking, and there is a time for people to tell their stories and to sing, march and pray together. But there is also time for spontaneous, dramatic action.

In a moment caught in the documentary film *Pray the Devil Back to Hell*, hotel security officers moved to arrest Gbowee and others: Gbowee responded, “I will make it very easy for you to arrest me,” and she began to take off her clothes. Other women rose to do the same. She was responding intuitively, without forethought, she says. Her thoughts were “a jumble.” The point was to say: “OK, if you think you’ll humiliate me with an arrest, watch me humiliate myself more than you could have dreamed.”

Later she realized that her action had “summoned a traditional power.” In Africa, a man is cursed if he sees a married woman naked. If Gbowee and the other women were to undress, they would in effect be bringing a curse on the men in the room—the guards and the leaders who had gathered for the peace talks. The president of Nigeria, General Abdulsalami Abubakar, intervened and urged the men back to the negotiating table.

From this confrontation, a fragile peace was born. The military conflict did not end immediately, but the ceasefire was signed, and within a month, Taylor had resigned and gone into exile in Nigeria. The peace has proven lasting, much to WIPNET’s surprise. Gradually Liberia has started the long road back from war.

The country was “absolutely devastated by 13 years of war,” says Bushkofsky. Whole villages were wiped out. Many buildings in the capital were uninhabitable but occupied by squatters nonetheless. Hospitals, schools and roads were obliterated. Many neighborhoods lacked electricity and running water. All of these problems continue to challenge the country.

For Gbowee, the next ten years would present their own great challenges. She had defined herself as an iconoclast, a powerful speaker and a leader of great intuition. The days of mass action were over, and yet there was so much work to be done. Hungry for more education and restless to find a way to assist African women, she was torn between seizing the opportunities for study and shaping newly forming political groups. Compounding the uncertainty was the painful divide between family life and work that did not let up in the post-protest years.

In 2005, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, a U.S.-

educated woman who had initially supported Taylor, was elected president of Liberia—the first woman president of an African nation. Gbowee was ambivalent about Sirleaf because of her connection to Taylor, but she came to be one of her most crucial supporters. Gbowee rallied women to Sirleaf’s cause. When Sirleaf offered Gbowee a place in her administration, Gbowee said no. She was not ready to cede the role of outsider. She could see how easily government could become corrupt, and she learned how powerfully one can speak from outside.

Meanwhile, on the international stage, Gbowee’s star was rising. In 2005, while in the U.S. studying for a degree at Eastern Mennonite University, she was approached by Abigail Disney, who wanted to make a documentary film about Women’s Mass Action in Liberia. At first, Gbowee was skeptical. “I didn’t see what I had to say to these white girls,” she writes. “Disney? Were they planning to make a cartoon?” But she warmed to the idea, and *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* premiered in 2008, winning first place at the Tribeca film festival.

Suddenly many doors opened. She has advised the UN on disarmament and has addressed the UN’s Security Council meeting on women and security. She received a Profile in Courage Award from the John F. Kennedy Library Foundation and a Blue Ribbon Peace Award from the Women’s Leadership Board at the JFK School of Government. At every stop, her frank assessment of the West’s engagement with

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I met Gbowee at a luncheon for ELCA women a few days before it was announced that she was a winner of the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize. She stared over my shoulder at a table loaded with desserts. "I'm trying to reduce," she said with a little longing in her voice before filling a plate with fruit. She looked tired, and she had admitted to being tired in her remarks to the gathering. She was on a monthlong book tour. During our interview, she checked e-mail from back home. She was distracted and restless, even while graciously submitting to photo requests and book signings. She needed to be at the Council on Global Affairs that evening, then on a plane to New York for a presentation at the Clinton Global Initiative the next day—and that was before the West Coast tour even began. "God will give me the strength," she said wearily.

At age 39, Gbowee ponders her next steps. Should she get a Ph.D. in public policy? Or should she start planning a run for parliament? When I asked her about the Ph.D., she looked down and away. "That is my way of wanting to hide," she said softly. Then added, "I want to do a Ph.D. not for myself, but for girls, to show them and my daughters that regardless of where you find yourself in this life, you can still achieve your highest potential."

A political run is tugging on her too. When the subject of Liberian politics comes up, her face lights up and her voice grows more intense. If she were asked to join the government of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf again, would she say yes this time? "I might say yes." Sirleaf is currently seeking a second six-year term as president of Liberia. But Gbowee's long-range plan is to move back to Liberia and run for parliament in the next six years.

"To stay outside is a strong temptation for me, the temptation to continue my activism. But I know that if you stand on the outside, unless you have political connections, you can't make the changes that need to be made. So I can stand on the outside or I can go in and say, 'Let's work together to change this.' The inside represents power, control, resources. It is difficult to function as an outside organization. You can have ideas, but without resources, you can't do them."

If Gbowee decides to run, she will be joining a wave of women's formal political action in Africa. In Cameroon, entrepreneur Kah Walla is running a lively campaign for president, although corruption is expected to prevent a true popular vote. In Rwanda, quotas for women in government were set after the civil war, and women were supposed to hold one-third of all seats—but today they hold more than half. In the newly formed nation of Southern Sudan, women make up more than half the registered voters. Gbowee's organization, Women Peace and Security Network-Africa, based in Ghana, has been

working in Sierra Leone and Nigeria building women's political power and training women to run for government.

But working through government has never been Gbowee's personal method. She seems less interested in the mechanisms of government than in personal transformation and awakening political activism in others.

Gbowee has seen her share of corrupt politicians and endured her share of empty political rhetoric. As a political outsider, she has criticized the European Union's peacekeepers for creating more problems for women in countries where they serve. She has taken the UN to task for poorly planned and executed aid to African nations. She has declared that until church bishops and ministers stop beating their wives in private, they have no right to speak of a Christian witness in public.

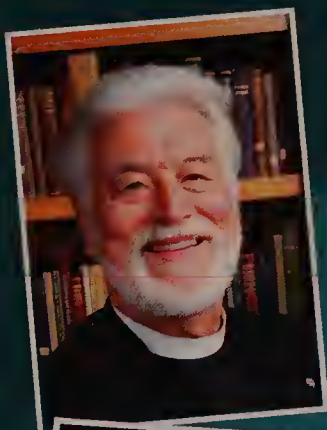
A spontaneous thinker and actor who is known for her restless nature and sharp rhetoric may not be well suited to a government position. But Gbowee says she is interested in seeing what she can do. "If you are in a government, you can help to shift things; you might be able to make changes." If it doesn't work, she said, "you have the option to go back outside." **CC**

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by Barbara Brown Taylor

Redeeming darkness

AS I WRITE THIS, the end of daylight saving time is right around the corner. A week from now the sun will come up at 7 a.m. and set before 6 p.m., so that the day is more dark than light. Darkness is complete where I live, way out in the country at the end of a dirt road. When city people come to visit, they get jumpy after dark. Christian people do too, leading me to wonder where we got the idea that darkness exists chiefly to be vanquished.

Biblically speaking, darkness is the pits. In the first testament, light stands for life and darkness for death. Sheol is dark as hell. When God is angry with people, they are plunged into darkness. Locusts darken the land. People grope in the dark without light, for the day of the Lord is darkness and not light.

In the second testament, light stands for knowledge and darkness for ignorance. When the true light comes into the world, the world does not know him. He has come so that everyone who believes in him should not remain in the darkness, but they love darkness more than light. On the day he dies, darkness descends on the land from noon until three. First John sums it up: "God is light and in him there is no darkness at all."

Or, in the vernacular of the Chattahoochee Baptist Church sign near my house, "If you cut God's light off, you'll be sitting in the dark with the devil."

This strikes me as a problematic teaching on the verge of Advent, the church season of deepening darkness, when Christians are asked to remember that we measure time differently from the dominant culture in which we live. We begin our year when the days are getting darker, not lighter. We count sunset as the beginning of a new day. However things appear to our naked eyes, we trust that the seeds of light are planted in darkness, where they sprout and grow we know not how. This darkness is necessary to new life, even when it is uncomfortable and goes on too long.

Ask any expectant mother if she wants her baby to come early and she will say no, she does not. As badly as her back hurts, as long as it has been since she has seen her toes, she is willing to wait because the baby is not ready yet. The eyelashes are ready, but not the fingernails. The kidneys are ready, but not the lungs. Those wing-shaped sacks are still preparing to make the leap from fluid to air. There is still more time to do in the dusky womb, where the baby is growing like a seed in the dark.

The child's parents may never be ready, especially if this is

their first. They want this; they are terrified of this. They planned for this; they cannot imagine how this happened. Meanwhile, they have a few baby-less weeks to go, which they can put to good use. They can make sure the nursery is ready. They can learn to sing some lullabies. They can think about what it means to bring a human being into the world, and what it will take to raise this child up into his or her full humanity. All they cannot do is hold a baby in the light, because the baby is still in the dark.

The church waits like this during Advent—mulishly refusing to sing the songs pouring from loudspeakers at every shopping mall, stubbornly counting the days, puritanically declining to open any presents—because the baby is not ready yet, which means that we are not ready either. We have some time in the dark left to go.

There is one word for darkness in the Bible that stands out from the rest. It shows up in the book of Exodus, at the foot of Mount Sinai, right after God has delivered Torah to the people:

Darkness is not presided over by a different God.

"Then the people stood at a distance, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was" (20:21).

This is *araphel*, my concordance says, the thick darkness that indicates God's presence as surely as the brightness of God's glory—something God later clarifies through the prophet Isaiah, in case anyone missed it earlier. "I am the LORD, and there is no other. I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe; I the LORD do all these things" (Isa. 45:6–7).

Here is a helpful reminder to all who fear the dark. Darkness does not come from a different place than light; it is not presided over by a different God. The long nights of Advent and the early mornings of Easter both point us toward the God for whom darkness and light are alike. Both are fertile seasons for those who walk by faith and not by sight.

Even in the dark, the seed sprouts and grows—we know not how—while God goes on giving birth to the truly human in Christ and in us.

Barbara Brown Taylor teaches at Piedmont College.

IN Review

Generous forgiveness

by Walter Brueggemann

Nicholas Wolterstorff doesn't dumb anything down. He insists on closely reasoned, carefully parsed argument. He refuses facile writing and glib statements that might make the argument easy. He does careful, demanding work on every page and insists that the reader travel along, doing equally hard work.

Of late the hard work done by Wolterstorff concerns questions of justice; preceding *Justice in Love* was his book *Justice: Rights and Wrongs*. Propelled to questions of justice by his encounter with apartheid in South Africa and with the suffering of the Palestinians, Wolterstorff pushes back to metaquestions, and by the time he finishes, the issues have been radically reframed.

In *Justice in Love*, Wolterstorff takes up the question of the relationship between agape love and justice. He arrives at that question via a quick but firm rejection of egoism, eudaemonism and utilitarianism as inadequate ways to think about the practice of well-being. The problem in each case is that self-interest and self-promotion cloud the capacity to commit to the other and that each approach seeks a universal formulation of practice that does not focus on the specific subject at hand.

As an alternative to these obvious philosophical options, Wolterstorff takes up agapism. His discussion concerns unconditional self-giving for the sake of the other that, while being enacted, valorizes the other. But he quickly acknowledges that such an unqualified focus on the flourishing of the other raises hard questions about rights—that is, about questions of justice. Thus his reflection is framed by the relation of

agape love to justice and the issue of just deserts.

Wolterstorff's discussion is situated in relation to three major reflections on justice and love. The great Lutheran bishop Anders Nygren, in *Agape and Eros*, argued that agape love is completely selfless and so is rooted only in God's capacity to forgive. That book, so influential for the generation of this reviewer, simply dismissed questions of justice, insisting that agape proceeds unconditionally, even if it violates justice. Reinhold Niebuhr, however, argued in his works of critical realism that justice obtains in the public sphere and cannot be qualified by agape. Finally, Wolterstorff finds in Kierkegaard an affirmation that the gospel has changed everything about the issue of justice.

Wolterstorff's argument allows for legitimate self-love, which is not to be confused with self-indulgence (that is, it is love in the manner of the neighbor commandment); he sees that such love consists of benevolence toward the neighbor and includes doing justice. The command to love the neighbor is not a form of "the reciprocity code" but a call to care for everyone, even those who are unable to reciprocate. Such love requires that we "de-center the self."

Wolterstorff presents an extended argument concerning forgiveness and generosity, which are at the center of agape love. It is not difficult to locate generosity and forgiveness in agape love; the wonderment has to do with how these are to be assessed in relation to justice, for they seem to be indiscriminate violations of what is fair and merited.

Concerning forgiveness, Wolterstorff

eschews cheap grace. He sees that genuine forgiveness must be evoked by repentance, so that it is a moral transaction and not just a "relational, existential" one, as it has become in much pop theology. I find this to be an enormous clarification of an issue clouded over by both Nygren and Niebuhr. Wolterstorff's insistence on the moral dimension of forgiveness is at the heart of his thesis:

The discovery of forgiveness was not possible within the framework of the ancient ethicists. . . . There are frameworks of thought within which forgiveness can find no home. Forgiveness entered the world along with the recognition of divine and human worth, of being wronged, of rights, of duty, of guilt. It cannot occur where those are not recognized.

"Full and complete forgiveness" will forego retribution but does not undermine justice, precisely because it has a moral dimension.

Forgiveness is an act of generosity that reaches out to affirm the worth of the other, a worth that is not diminished by affront. In a workable society, including a liberal democracy, there must be a capacity to act for the common good that is not limited to retri-

Walter Brueggemann's most recent book is *Disruptive Grace: Reflections on God, Scripture, and the Church* (Fortress).

NICHOLAS WOLTERSTORFF
JUSTICE IN LOVE

Justice in Love
By Nicholas Wolterstorff
Eerdmans, 306 pp., \$35.00

bution. The common good requires that the other, even the offending other, be treated as a rational moral agent. Blind retributive justice violates moral agency and makes real social relationships impossible.

Wolterstorff offers a compelling comment on Jesus' parable of the laborers in the vineyard, in which the landowner is not acting unjustly toward the workers who came early by being generous toward those who came later. No one was wronged in the parable, because the landowner kept faith with the early workers, even though he was generous toward the later workers.

It was not until I reached the end of the book that I could see where Wolterstorff was headed. The book culminates with a comment on the book of Romans, and the author is not even a Lutheran! Not surprisingly, Wolterstorff, following Krister Stendahl and E. P. Sanders, identifies with the newer reading of Romans: the epistle is not preoccupied with "justification by grace" but concerns God's impartial generosity toward Jews and gentiles. God keeps covenant with Jews who have obeyed the Torah, but God reaches beyond the Jews toward gentiles who have not obeyed the Torah. Thus the requirement of justice is acknowledged; God has not violated the Jews who live in covenant. But God's generosity is fully just because God cares, in benevolent ways, for all those who are in the purview of God's rule.

God is a "lover of justice," but acts in generosity for those "outside the law" while taking seriously those "inside the law." God's "dismissal of charges" permits a new identity for both those inside the law and those outside the law who are alienated from God. In such generous forgiveness—which includes the moral accountability of faith—God enacts God's own mode of justice, which permits a new beginning and new social relationships.

This argument, breathtaking in its sweep, culminates in a daring exposition of divine justice, rooted in God's own life, a justice that is completely permeated by generosity. This is a meta-argument. Only in the last pages does it draw close to the specific reasons that

God's transformative justice matters for our common good:

Bodily passions impel us into wronging others. Negative emotions impel us—hatred, fear, jealousy, insecurity. And ideologies into which we have been inducted impel and lure us to trample on the rights of others: nationalism, militarism, materialism, racism, sexism, communism, capitalism, you name it.

Wolterstorff no doubt will continue the argument. Since he is focusing on Romans, we may expect him to carry the argument into Romans 12, where the people of God embrace the neighborly justice of God. This argument is sharply germane in a society that wants to exclude some—immigrants, gays, and even women and children in some venues—from the largess of the community. That God can dismiss charges and act restoratively in generosity, Wolterstorff shows, is a deep act of agape.

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Rethinking Poverty: Income, Assets, and the Catholic Social Justice Tradition

By James P. Bailey

University of Notre Dame Press,
192 pp., \$30.00

James Bailey has written a superb, creative and timely book whose primary audience should be the U.S. Congress. Unfortunately, the current members of Congress do not seem to possess the intellectual wattage neces-

"Just 400 Americans, 400, have more wealth than half of all Americans combined."

-Wall Street Journal, March 7, 2011

"The economic top one percent of Americans now owns over 70% of all financial assets, an all-time record."

-David McGraw, Alternet, February 17, 2010

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sary to profit from it. As a supercommittee of our congressional leaders meets to ponder reductions of federal expenditures of more than a trillion dollars and possible reform of the federal tax code, Bailey's wise volume could provide some Christian guidance.

Bailey describes and advocates adoption of what he calls asset building for the poor, a new strategy for fighting poverty by expanding lower-income people's financial and social assets. The reigning policy orthodoxy is that poverty is a function of income flow and consumption of goods and services. The goal of an asset-based strategy is to help people build a secure financial foundation that will keep them out of poverty.

Bailey gives a strong introduction to this emerging field of social and policy analysis. One astonishing aspect of his argument involves the degree to which the federal tax code favors the nonpoor's accumulation of wealth through mechanisms such as tax-favored retirement accounts and the mortgage interest deduction. These benefits accrue primarily to people who pay a substantial amount in federal income taxes. Why not offer incentives for wealth accumulation to people with lower income as well?

Bailey correlates the asset-building strategy with philosopher Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach. Nussbaum first describes the distinctive activities of the human person by asking what the characteristic activities of the human being are. Second, she argues that the good life involves the ability to carry out these activities. And finally, she contends that people who are unable to perform these activities have a claim on society.

Bailey demonstrates that an overlapping consensus may be emerging among policy advocates, philosophers such as Nussbaum and Amartya Sen, and perhaps most interesting of all, proponents of Catholic social teaching. The consensus points toward supplementing current income-based antipoverty strategies with approaches based on assets and capabilities.

Bailey interrogates Catholic social teaching in light of these two approaches. Outlining the basic tenets of Catholic social teaching, such as the dignity of the human person, the social nature of persons and the preferential option for the poor, he demonstrates that there is substantial agreement but also some dissonance among these three streams of thought. He also provides a quick tour of Catholic teaching on private ownership of property, the duty of the state to intervene in the economy on behalf of the poor, and the need for citizens to be able to participate in public and political life.

Earlier this year, a minor storm broke out in Washington when the Republican leadership in the House of Representatives released correspondence between members of their caucus and Archbishop Timothy Dolan, president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Lawmakers wanted to show that their draconian budget cuts are in accord with Catholic social teaching. Dolan's ambiguous response did little to counter their claim.

There is an opportunity for responsible moral voices, like Bailey's, to enter into this political morass and to suggest some specific tax code reforms that might benefit the poor and not only the rich. Unfortunately, instead we have gotten street theater and agitprop from progressive Christian leaders in Washington, where getting arrested passes for prophetic action. Bailey's work suggests that ethicists and economists can serve the country with concrete and specific budget proposals that might persuade, cajole or shame Congress to reform the tax code in a way that helps the poor instead of hurting them.

Reviewed by Shaun Casey, who teaches Christian ethics at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C.

SUBMISSIONS

If you would like to write an article for the CENTURY, please send a query to submissions@christiancentury.org or to Submissions, The Christian Century, 104 S. Michigan Ave., Suite 700, Chicago, IL 60603-5901. Allow four to six weeks for a response from our editors. We do not consider unsolicited manuscripts for our regular columns or book reviews.

From Disgust to Humanity: Sexual Orientation and Constitutional Law

By Martha C. Nussbaum
Oxford University Press, 256 pp., \$21.95

Amid a flailing economy at home and continuing U.S. military engagement abroad, issues of sexuality retain a prominent place on the American political agenda. Do Americans simply have a prurient obsession with what others do in the privacy of their bedrooms, or do the continuing debates about sexual orientation reflect deeper divisions in our culture? What is the root reason that gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people are so widely perceived as deviant? How should the Christian community respond to the many contentious issues that arise from differences in sexual orientation?

Same-sex marriage is now fully legal in six states plus the District of Columbia. The U.S. military's controversial "don't ask, don't tell" policy has been repealed. LGBT clergy increasingly are welcomed as leaders of mainline Protestant and Jewish congregations. Poll after poll indicates growing tolerance of LGBT people among the American public—particularly among younger people. Some perceive the coming of LGBT equality as inevitable and rejoice, while others lament the passing of yet another element of traditional American morality. Cultural change is always welcomed by some and profoundly resisted by others.

In *From Disgust to Humanity*, legal scholar Martha Nussbaum of the University of Chicago moves through the rhetoric surrounding homosexuality and asserts that aversion to LGBT people, and thus opposition to their social equality, is rooted in the "politics of disgust": dominant groups' tendency to label particular beliefs, practices and innate characteristics as not just anathema but physically disgusting, which legitimizes systematic mistreatment of people who embody the undesirable beliefs, practices or characteristics.

Nussbaum contends that the politics of disgust must be replaced at every turn with an inclusive "politics of humanity": the accordance of equal respect, rights

and opportunities to all. People of faith have much to learn from Nussbaum's perspective because it cuts to the heart of the sinful human tendency to exclude and stigmatize our fellows when they fail to live up to culturally imposed expectations about how "good people" should conduct themselves in this world.

Throughout her book, Nussbaum uses evocative terms to illustrate the nature of the disgust that she says underlies discrimination against LGBT people. She refers frequently to things that typically evoke unthinking revulsion, such as bodily wastes, decaying food and slimy insects, saying that LGBT people evoke a similar reaction in their opponents.

When homosexuality is framed as disgusting, heterosexual people and their intimate practices come to be seen not just as acceptable but as clean and pure by comparison. Thus antigay rhetoric results in LGBT people being represented as "the surrogate dirt of a community, enabling the dominant group to feel clean and heavenly," much as Indian "untouchables" (*dalits*) are irredeemable in traditional Hinduism, as Jews were demonized in Nazi Germany and as African people were considered worthy of enslavement in North America.

The practice of elevating some members of society while condemning others—in accordance with often arbitrary, ever-changing and culturally bound rubrics—is an unfortunate reality of the human condition. Just as a bully gets a jolt of self-esteem from disdaining others, dominant members of society feel better about themselves when they disdain others. "Projective disgust is inspired by a powerful loathing of aspects of the self, and it typically seeks a handy scapegoat," Nussbaum writes.

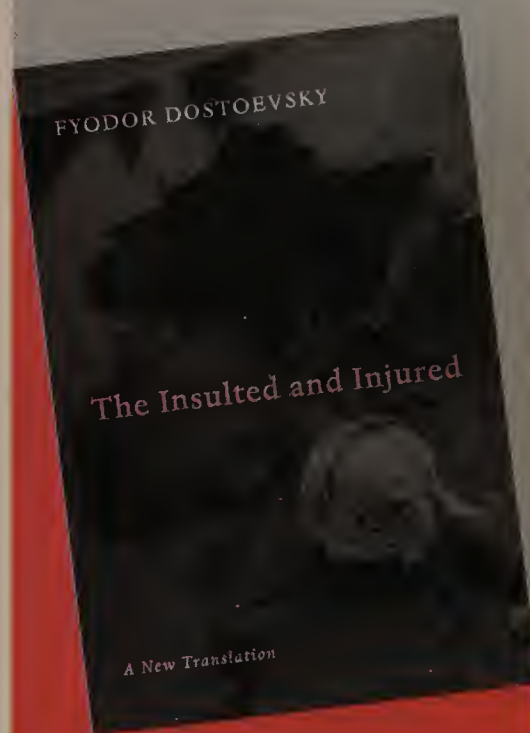
The practice of scapegoating has an unusual relationship with the central tenet of American culture: individualism. Because of the centrality of individual freedom in American culture, many Americans assume that other people's values, attitudes and behaviors are primarily the result of voluntary choice: if you're different from me, it is because you have chosen to be that way, and if some-

Reviewed by Laura R. Olson, professor of political science at Clemson University.

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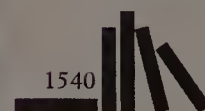
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thing about you runs afoul of the dominant values system, you have chosen to be deviant. Thus the individualism that pervades American culture makes it easier to react with disgust to people who live outside of the mainstream in one way or another. Moreover, many Americans assume that people are free to overcome their "deficiencies"—and to do so on their own, without support from the community. Overweight? Follow the latest wonder diet. Lifelong smoker? There's no excuse for not giving up that filthy habit!

If we transpose Nussbaum's logic from the legal realm to the context of the church, we must conclude that all people must be welcomed fully, without caveat. Nussbaum would have no tolerance for a "theology of disgust," including the "love the sinner, hate the sin" trope. Fortunately, she notes, in most matters American religion is inclined to reject the politics of disgust: "In the area of religion, America . . . has consistently sided against collectivist values and in favor of a strong respect for the individual's zone of liberty."

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In the Days of Caesar: Pentecostalism and Political Theology

By Amos Yong

Eerdmans, 432 pp., \$30.00 paperback

In the course of the 20th century, Pentecostalism expanded from a small revival movement to a global presence comparable in its extent and variety to Roman Catholicism or Anglicanism. Yet few people in mainstream U.S. churches know much about it, and what little they do know relates more to Pentecostal practice than to Pentecostal thought.

Non-Pentecostal Christians tend to see Pentecostalism through a sociological rather than a theological lens. Amos Yong is a Pentecostal theologian who aims to change that. With a steady output of works on Christian hospitality, global theology, religion and science, and religion and society, he furthers a dialogue between Pentecostal theology and other schools of thought that is shaped by his broad knowledge of theology and his inclusive vision of his own tradition.

In the Days of Caesar develops a Pentecostal view of Christian life under worldly powers. Yong's interpretation begins in the days of Caesar Augustus, whose rule provided the political context for the narrative of Luke-Acts, in which Pentecostalism finds its origin and bearings. A global religious movement necessarily takes different forms as it finds itself operating under different leadership and in different settings; Pentecostalism is extraordinarily diverse, encompassing Pat Robertson's American conservatism and Juan Sepúlveda's Chilean liberation theology.

Yong introduces readers to the full range of these leaders and movements with analytical clarity and without judgment. Rather than outlining a single, normative way of Pentecostal thinking, he explains how particular versions of Pentecostalism came to take the forms they have. This diversity is crucial to his theology. The multiplicity of tongues is as important to the Pentecostal experience

Reviewed by Robin Lovin, who teaches at Southern Methodist University.

as the unity of the Spirit, and Yong feels no need to have all Pentecostals come out in the same place politically.

The Pentecostal movement as Yong describes it thus encompasses a wider range of political theologies than denominationally organized forms of Christianity. He seeks to put all of them in dialogue with other versions of Christian political thought. All Christian thinkers, from the most conservative to the most progressive, have counterparts in the Pentecostal community, and Yong is convinced that in all cases the two sides have something to learn from each other if the dialogue can be opened.

Pentecostal theology is often taken to be primarily eschatological. The gift of the Spirit marks the "last days," and theology is supposed to anticipate imminent fulfillment. Yong, however, sees Pentecostalism as "performative." The way that Pentecostals live out their faith under present conditions is more important to their identity than are their beliefs about what is about to happen next. Their performances may take place in the realms of politics, culture, civil society or economics. A large part of Yong's book is devoted to surveying the Pentecostal possibilities in each of these areas of human life and putting them in dialogue with the most likely counterparts from other theological traditions. For example, Yong considers the Pentecostal view of civil society in relation to John Milbank's Radical Orthodoxy, and he compares Pentecostal understandings of economic life to American Catholic thinking about subsidiarity and solidarity. The result is not only a global survey of Pentecostalism but also a compendium of postmodern Christian social thought.

Even in a book of some 400 pages, these many possibilities for dialogue can barely be introduced and can only rarely be developed. A reader without a broad knowledge of contemporary political theology is apt to feel as much a stranger among the mainstream academic possibilities as among the varieties of African and Latin American Pentecostalism. If Yong had pursued one or two of these dialogues in more detail, he might have given us a better idea of Pentecostalism as a voice in ecumenical theology. There

are few Pentecostal writers with his scholarly background to develop the ideas enacted in Pentecostal ways of life.

Yong pulls a few themes together in a final chapter on Pentecostal hope. The secular world is irreducibly multiple and diverse, Yong contends, and Christians must resist political pressure to unify it prematurely. That is why he finds guidance in Catholic teaching about subsidiarity and in Abraham Kuyper's writings on the independent spheres of social life, and also why he rejects political ideologies that impose a single order on civil society and concentrate power in the hands of government. In the days of Caesar, unity exists only in hope. Perhaps that is the only place it should exist. Premature unity is likely to be politically coercive and theologically rigid. Performing the Christian life is a matter of bearing witness to hope while living with the differences. Like the Pentecost experience itself, Pentecostal political theology requires both the experience of diversity and the anticipation of unity.

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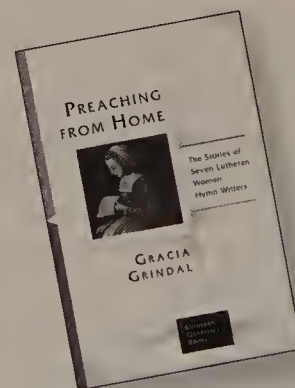
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Melancholia

Written and directed by Lars von Trier
Starring Kirsten Dunst, Charlotte Gainsbourg
and Kiefer Sutherland

The oftentimes celebrated, sometimes scorned Danish writer-director Lars von Trier has been churning out grim tales of human frailty and moral depravity for almost 20 years. From the ethereal beauty of *Breaking the Waves* and the minimalist wisdom of *Dogville* to the sadomasochistic howls of *Antichrist*, he never seems happier than when daring audiences to figure out his message and whether the message is worth delivering.

Melancholia is a disturbing tale of personal pain juxtaposed with an eerie end-of-the-world story. The film is divided into two parts. The first focuses on Justine (Kirsten Dunst, a long way from *Spider-Man*), who has just married the sweet and earnest Michael (Alexander Skarsgård) and is ready to party at a ritzy castle reception hosted by her loving sister, Claire (Charlotte Gainsbourg) and Claire's wealthy but grumpy husband, John (Kiefer Sutherland). Von Trier fans would expect this reception to be filled with anger, resentment and enough bile to fill a champagne fountain, but even they may be unprepared for the displays of cruelty conjured up by the wedding guests, who include Justine's distant father (John Hurt), her brittle and bitter mother (Charlotte Rampling) and her inhumane employer (Stellan Skarsgård).

At times von Trier has been able to rein in his contempt for his characters, but here he exhibits little restraint. The wedding reception resembles something out of *Marat/Sade*. But since we don't believe any of these characters to be real, it's hard to care what happens to them.

But we do start to care in the film's second part, which concerns a planet that has been hiding behind our sun since the creation of the universe and is only now



WEDDING CATAclysm: Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* begins with a bilious wedding reception, then turns to a larger catastrophe.

appearing and heading straight for Earth. Some, including the science-minded John, believe that the planet will simply pass by, providing quite a show for earthlings. But the sense of doom that permeates the story at this point suggests that a direct hit is more in order—not because that makes for a better ending, but because von Trier seems to believe that we deserve to be destroyed, and in the most violent way possible.

The second part is as subtle and engaging as the first is overt and ugly. The two sisters' difficult relationship is revealed to be a curious blending of needs and wants. Justine awaits her fate with a stoic sense of inevitability, while Claire longs for the life she has and the even better one she hopes for. The film's second half also reveals von Trier's power with cinematic imagery, from a beautiful shot of an exhausted horse collapsing to various shots of the approaching planet looming in the distance.

Melancholia is a fascinating exercise in extremes, with cruel slaps and loving strokes no more than a few frames apart, just the way von Trier likes it.

Take Shelter

Written and directed by Jeff Nichols
Starring Michael Shannon
and Jessica Chastain

Take Shelter deals with the end of the world in a creepier and even more meta-

phoric manner than von Trier's *Melancholia*. The story revolves around Curtis (Michael Shannon), whose placid working-class life with his loving wife (Jessica Chastain) and deaf daughter in rural Ohio is suddenly interrupted by a series of disturbing images, most of them suggesting an approaching storm. These images, which no one else but Curtis seems to see, soon begin to invade his dreams, where they are accompanied by violent scenes.

Though Curtis fears that his obsessive visions and dreams are a sign of impending mental illness, which runs in his family, he feels he can't take a chance. So he decides to spend money he doesn't have to build a huge underground shelter in his backyard to protect his family from the impending apocalypse.

Take Shelter is a masterful work. Its beauty lies in the subtle way it sucks the audience in, opening up doors of possibility that we weren't aware of ten minutes earlier. The story gets complicated as family members, co-workers and doctors get thrown into the mix.

Through it all, Curtis stands tall, like a prophet of the Old Testament. We sense that his shelter is like an ark, built airtight to survive the flood and save those he loves. Whether it's paranoia or divine intervention, Curtis keeps hammering away.

Reviewed by John Petrakis, who teaches screenwriting in Chicago.

by Philip Jenkins

Traveling across Europe elicits constant double-takes for someone of the baby-boom generation. Just as you are relishing the sights in a lovely city like Prague, Dresden or Budapest, you are startled to see an object or a historical marker that reminds you how very recently these places belonged to a sinister political and cultural order.

Is it really just a quarter century ago that nations like Czechoslovakia and East Germany were part of a Soviet empire that threatened to engulf Western Europe? Once upon a time—and not long ago—there was another Europe.

Equally consigned to oblivion, at least for most Americans, is the religious story of communist Europe, in which Christians suffered horrific persecutions. Wandering in Hungary today, you will casually see signs with names like Recsk and Kistarcsa, with no warning that in the 1950s these were the sites of lethal concentration camps in which Christian clergy and laity were murdered in the thousands.

It was at Kistarcsa, for instance, that Bishop Zoltán Meszlényi was martyred in 1951. In the Czech Republic, you might see the old uranium mining complexes of Příbram and Jáchymov without realizing how many religious enemies of the state died here in the 1950s undergoing forced labor that amounted to torture.

Through the 1960s, Amer-

ican Christians, especially Catholics, remained highly attuned to this situation as they followed the career of a heroic resister like Hungarian cardinal József Mindszenty. Today, though, the persecutions seem to belong to ancient history, as remote as the time of Diocletian.

That amnesia reflects the totally changed political situation and the restoration of religious freedom: who could imagine such horrible deeds happening in such benevolently European and democratic settings? The new Hungarian constitution even vaunts the nation's Christian heritage. Yet it would be tragic if such a dreadful part of Christian history were lost to collective memory, if only because later generations have so much to learn from the various strategies that oppressed churches adopted in the face of crisis.

The need to keep these memories alive drove a heroic scholarly enterprise, one that makes it possible to re-examine those persecutions in astonishing detail. The project began when Anglican canon Michael Bourdeaux visited Moscow in the 1950s. He encountered the city's surviving Orthodox churches and thereafter made it his life's work to tell the West about the Orthodox and about other religious denominations living under communist rule.

In 1969 Bourdeaux founded Keston College in a London suburb and later moved it to Oxford. For 20 years, Keston was a center for the academic study of religion in the Eastern bloc and the primary source to which media and political leaders could turn for accurate and up-to-date information.

Providing reliable news might not seem like an unusual role for the college, but Bourdeaux's access to sources on the ground was astonishing in the context of the closed and paranoid Soviet empire of the time. Keston played a critical role in keeping pressure on the Soviets as they made their stumbling moves toward liberalization. In 1984, Bourdeaux won the Templeton Prize.

In later years, Keston became the victim of its own success. Although religious liberty issues remain alive in the new Russia, they are nothing like as prominent or as newsworthy as they were in the epic days of the cold war, and the college faded from the headlines. But Keston retained its staggering archive, which in 2007 found a new home at Baylor University in Texas.

Baylor's Keston Center is a massively underexplored resource, which offers rich pickings for researchers in

European history or in the larger picture of modern Christianity. Besides the expected books, news clippings and printed records, Keston has complete runs of the various atheist and anti-religious magazines that the Soviets and their puppets ran to combat the influence of faith, with all the related cartoons and posters.

You could spend days just sorting through the visual materials from 1917 onward, particularly the propaganda posters presenting venomous attacks on Christians, Jews and Muslims. Contemplating the visuals alone, one can trace how confidence in socialist-scientific materialism reached its pinnacle with the Soviet space program and declined through the miserable Breznev years.

And then there is the religious samizdat, the underground "self-published" materials that Soviet believers produced through the darkest years, at risk of imprisonment or worse. Among the thousands of clandestine publications at the Keston Center are petitions, news sheets, and memoirs. One evocative item is the 1960s trial transcript of a Russian Baptist organizer, surreptitiously recorded on fragments of cloth. It's a relic of a terrifying, lost world—but not one that should ever be forgotten.

Philip Jenkins recently published an expanded edition of The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity.

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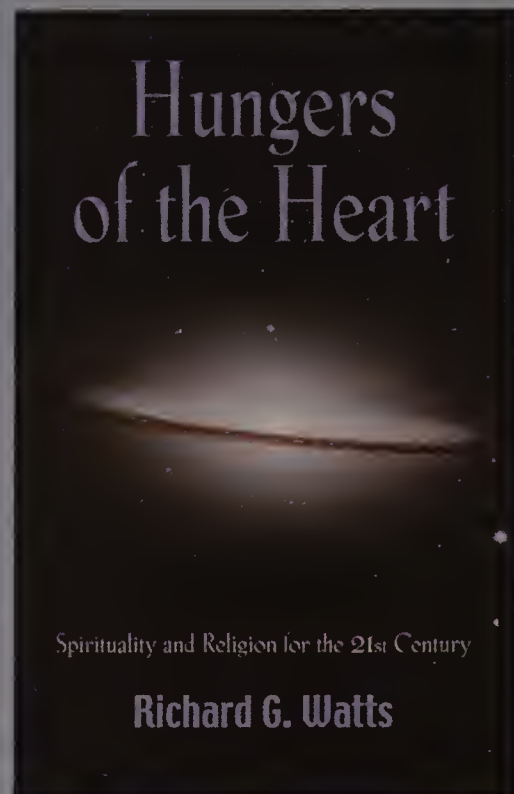
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by Richard Watts

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ON Art



The Double Rose Vision, by Rick Beerhorst

Melding seriousness with wry joy, Michigan artist Rick Beerhorst creates location out of dislocation, dislocation out of location. His preparatory sketches are artworks in their own right. “When I am working up an idea for a new painting,” he writes in his blog, “I am in a very vulnerable place. I don’t like it there, but if I don’t go there, there are simply no new paintings.” In some of his writing, Beerhorst mentions divine appointments, those things we make plans for even as something else shows up that is “infinitely more interesting.”

—Lil Copan



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